PORCELAIN RAGE

A Manifesto for the Gen Z Woman

Simone O. Elias

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ALSO BY SIMONE O. ELIAS

Old Films, Young Eyes

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Porcelain Rage: A Manifesto for the Gen Z Woman

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Designed by JCK

for my grandmothers, Marilyn & Virginia

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Praise for *Porcelain Rage*

"In a culture that would rather talk about young women than listen when those same women speak for themselves, Porcelain Rage offers a welcome intervention. Elias's criticism is compelling, incisive, and often cathartic, even if you're not of her generational cohort."

— **Harron Walker,** writer for *The New York Times, The Cut,* and *Vulture*

Praise for *Old Films, Young Eyes*

"Simone O. Elias is the perfect Gen Z guide... [harboring] infectious enthusiasm and sophistication beyond her years, drawing the line from Elizabeth Taylor to Taylor Swift, from Born Yesterday to Barbie. Hats off to Simone!"

—**Michael Schulman,** staff writer at the New Yorker and author of *Oscar Wars: A History of Hollywood in Gold, Sweat and Tears*

"Culturally omnivorous…insightful."

—**The San Francisco Chronicle**

"Smart, vivacious writing...I know this is the first book of many more to come."

—**Kristin Marguerite Doidge,** author of *Nora Ephron: A Biography* and *Woman on Top: Becoming Greta Gerwig*

"[Elias has an] immense breadth of knowledge, curiosity, and passion for her subject, and she makes the case that historical inquiry can help us learn about ourselves and each other. Elias

writes with confidence and insight well beyond her years, and *Old Films, Young Eyes* is the perfect book to introduce the next generation of fans to the joys and complicated history of Hollywood's Golden Age."

—**Dr. Olympia Kiriakou**, film historian, host of The Screwball Story, and author of *Becoming Carole Lombard: Stardom, Comedy, and Legacy*.

"I second what the hot-headed politico said in one of the most classic of Golden Age comedies, *The Great McGinty*: This book belongs in every home."

—**Stuart Klawans**, film critic for *The Nation*

"I found myself smiling and shaking my head in disbelief at the keen observations and insights Elias brings to her writing. A clear and confident voice."

—**Matt Williams**, Creator of *Roseanne*, *Home Improvement*, author of *Glimpses*

"Elias's passion leaps off every page of *Old Films, Young Eyes*. This smart, well-researched book is the perfect introduction to some of Hollywood's forgotten gems and funky experiments—for teenagers but also moviegoers of all ages. Reading it made me yearn for a darkened theater and a tub of popcorn!"

—**Katie Gee Salisbury**, author of *Not Your China Doll: The Wild and Shimmering Life of Anna May Wong*

"Ms. Elias provides a unique experience that I cannot recommend enough."

—**Brittany King,** Silent Cinema School

A Note on Critical Method

We love to put things in boxes, don't we? Package them up in those little gifts of high or low, prestigious or trash. It is a way of making an uncategorized world make sense. But the boxes are also where books go to die, sealed into a single view of what they are and who they are for. This book will not sit still in one. It spans family history, fascist history, TikTok history, anthropological studies, interviews with therapists and Brooklyn teenagers, the outfits of women in Los Angeles, the biology of romance novels, forensic analysis of popular podcasts, and Camus epigraphs. It's not academic, it's not influencer, it's not pop-culture writing. It's cultural criticism, but with a new methodology: the Parallax Method.

Parallax is a term used mostly in astronomy, describing the way an object appears to shift when you view it from two different positions. But the shift also allows you to measure the distance to faraway stars accurately. The second view is needed to get things right. Our eyes, situated a couple of inches apart, provide a parallax effect as well. If you only look through one eye, you don't get the depth of the scene.

I grew up in a Jewish household trained in Talmudic debate, an intellectual tradition that thrives on the question rather than the answer, the living paradox rather than the black or white. The rabbis that compiled it spent roughly eight centuries arguing in the margins of each other's arguments, and they preserved the bad arguments with the good. They understood that the minority opinion is not a waste, it's the second eye

that helps us get to the best view. We seem to have forgotten this now, when everything is siloed into fields of expertise, prestige, or internet and social media structures. We treat the written word as fact when it is only one position. And a position is almost always valuable, sometimes for the wrongdoings in it. People still watch *The Birth of a Nation*, D.W. Griffith's atrociously racist 1915 film, because they want to understand the mechanics of racism in society. Same with propaganda: everything is worth studying, in my opinion, not because it is valid, but because it's a puzzle piece that will click together.

So many fields of thought that fail share one commonality: discriminating against sources, choosing only what they want to believe. I believe that everything every human has ever created, even if it is proven wrong, is representative of a larger whole of humanity. I used Nazi magazines as evidence in chapter four because the camouflage method behind that propaganda was a feature of human nature before it was a feature of fascism, and it can repeat. Nothing is inadmissible, from TikTok fluff to high theory, from the Talmud to twenty-five seconds ago. It is all a tapestry.

Nora Ephron said that everything is copy, and she meant her own life: take the humiliating thing that happened to you and tell it yourself, so you are the author instead of the subject. I am extending her rule beyond the self. Make everything copy, including shameful personal and historical episodes. That is how we get to theories that represent everyone, by holding the nuance and refusing to discard what we don't like.

Look at anything one way, and you get dictators, mass depression, a lockdown on a reality that is far more vivid and colorful and paradoxical than a single view will show. So put the box down. Look again from a different spot.

Keep both your eyes open.

A Note on the Publishing Apparatus

I know, given my experience in the publishing industry, that this open-access-for-all method may seem jarring or unprecedented. That's exactly why I did it. There is something incredibly submissive and patriarchal about waiting, begging for the attention of a gatekeeper. *Please read my story about how girls are dying! Please pay me a single ounce of attention! I'll be eternally grateful!*

No. I didn't want to put my time and energy into that—I wanted to put it into making sure everyone could read this and understand their own mental health crisis, assault, or societal pressures. I'm not bowing down, because that would invalidate my entire message.

I also won't let anyone tell me that this project is "unprofessional." To me, saying that is a profound signal of who you think is at the top. It is not the girls who suffer and intuit; to you, it is the ones who say "no, no, no" that deserve all the praise and respect. Those publishing world overseers, the ones who sit in their air-conditioned palaces turning away the things that make them most uncomfortable—those are the people who are keeping you from hearing the stories and truths you feel so deeply. The artist is expected to bow down to the gatekeeper as if a secular golden calf, the pinnacle of artistry and meritocracy. And yet, these undemocratic validators are completely siloed

from the rest of the world, unaware of the real life-and-death stakes of being a woman. Joan Didion said, "We tell ourselves stories to live." But what if we cannot live because the stories we so desperately needed were rejected? I have seen this happen to so many peers, and I am astounded by the sheer ineptitude of the publishing professionals who pass up, time and time again, the stories that really matter.

There is no one and nothing that can get in the way of me speaking the truth—the truth about how we really treat girls with mental illness behind locked doors, how we kill them through internet propaganda, and how we sell it back as their fault. A traditional publisher would have slashed this. Would have made it less stream-of-consciousness, less honest, more dull—they would have turned it into something they'd feel comfortable with a girl writing. Safe, calm, collected. That's the problem: for this book, the publishing ecosystem was part of the cage that wanted to keep me silent. That doesn't mean I'm completely against it at all; it just means that I'm not being submissive for a book that requires my dominance. I don't want other writers' hearts to be manipulated by placing publishing on the highest God-like pedestal, only to be disappointed that what they want isn't broad thinking but a confined box they want you to stay in. The ideal situation would be one in which there is no status game involved in the publishing process. The status game kills so many people's stories based on contingencies or fear.

Let us remember, as well, that the most formidable thinkers in history were shut out of the establishment. My conscious choice not to entertain it for this book rests on my belief that acceptance in publishing means sanitization, corporatization, and the opposite of what literature used to stand for. It is not merit they scan for; it is very often danger. And the most

dangerous to the mainstream make the most change. Safe gets forgotten; truth gets remembered. You do not need to beg to matter. You need to build a mind capable of critical thinking; a mind resistant to propaganda. This is not to say quality does not matter, but that "quality" to the publishing industry is often dulled, corporatized MFA homogeneity. It has always bewildered me why writers are not seen as the most crucial, powerful stake in publishing. The disrespect we endure only silences us more. Publishing is the bureaucratic stifling of genius.

I'm sick of how the industry puts women into neat little saleable categories. I've watched queer and trans friends be told that they needed to dull down their rage and make their stories more palatable. We don't need more palatable stories in an unpalatable world. This book is free, uncensored, and completely yours. That's how it should be.

Foreword

When I was little, all I wore was pink.

It was pre-cognizant boldness, a sense of passion I found from speaking, doing, and dressing wildly. Speaking wildly is less awkward than saying wildly.

A time that, looking back, was completely freed from the stresses and messes of growing up. I was known for screaming and running down the streets with my flame-red hair.

I gleefully dressed myself in hot pink dresses from Goodwill, sparkly boots from the aisles of San Francisco thrift stores. Being someone people wanted to look at was so easy. It felt as if I was born to do it—because I was.

Our images are seen through reflections, even at an early age. Our perception of ourselves, the hyper-awareness we are taught to have by our society, ends up warping who we think we can be and how we allow ourselves to show up.

Girls are told at an early age that their appearances matter greatly. The lighthearted, well-meaning comments ("your dress is so pretty! I love your hair!") turn into an entire system of values and beliefs that is simply absent when it comes to boys. "How do I look?" is supposed to be the forefront of thinking for girls, while for many boys, this thought doesn't come up until adolescence.

No, we still cannot escape the standards, entrenched in the very meaning of womanhood. We wouldn't be who we are without it, and yet we hate it almost as much as we hate ourselves.

Being a 21st-century girl is confusing, isolating, and infuriating. Often, we can't help but ask, "Is this all?" The same question the women before us asked (voiced by Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique) now takes on a different meaning.

The "mystique" used to be the societal assumption that women would find fulfillment with marriage, children, and housework. But the mystique is now the assumption that we'll find fulfillment with lifeless jobs, a lack of control over the things that are ours, and an endless array of the things we're not. In the worst moments, it can come down to: Is this everything I'm supposed to be? Have we really made no progress at all?

As a teen girl who previously wrote a book and got it published, I got some reasonable (and unreasonable) questions and gasps from interviewers about many things. Did your parents help you? Most girls your age are giggling about boys! How could you possibly have done this? Was it self-published?

They used words like confident. For me, that held the undertone of "Aren't you insecure about something? How dare you be so unself-conscious! Show us your humility! You must have some, after all; you're a girl."

They used words like precocious. At times, I felt patronized, as if they were trying to scare me back into gossiping with my friends in a Sephora. Like they wanted me to be "normal." As if it wasn't normal for someone of my age and gender to have passion, to work hard.

And they used words like "beautiful," as if my ideas were not valuable enough to be discussed on their own, as if the reason I was there was to be a commodity. As if I were an object to be sold along with the object I had created. "You and your book are good-looking."

No, don't complain about this, I thought to myself, as an

80-year-old man repeatedly cited my appearance during a live talk show interview. He said this from his living room, as I sat there in my makeup at 7 am. I wanted to be furious. Seething, I wanted to scream and shut the computer and never talk to him again. But there I was, answering his questions, pretending like it never happened. Who gave you the right to comment on that? Shouldn't I have the right to discuss my ideas without feeling like the odd one out? Couldn't they celebrate me without putting down other girls my age, as numerous people did? And why was my identity so important when all I wanted to talk about was film?

They would've called a boy a "prodigy." I was a "novelty." Part of it felt so deeply intertwined with my female identity that I couldn't shake it. Teen girls deserve to have their ideas taken seriously. I don't want to be reduced to a stereotype when discussing my achievements. Haven't we learned that teen girls are incredibly capable of doing great things? What about Anne Frank? Claudette Colvin? Malala?

I don't want to be called "confident," "precocious," or "beautiful" based on my career. I didn't feel like the "promising young woman" label people stuck on me. Instead, I felt like a ferocious jaguar, hungry to prove myself in a world that had shut me down—a world that made every girl feel like she was "too much." My persona, in real life and in public, felt simultaneously like a little, precocious doll and a boiled-over, rageful woman, done with everything.

I think most young women feel that way: both the porcelain and the rage.

I couldn't have been more grateful for the support I received with my first book. And yet, I felt like an outlier. A stroke of luck. A novelty. Meanwhile, I felt expected somehow to carry the heavy burden of modern girlhood all by myself—the

street harassment, online judgment, physical expectation, and comparison.

I wrote this book in 2026, a time when it's more important than ever to emphasize the rights of women: for our bodies, for our futures, and for our beliefs. This book, while partially serving as cultural commentary on young women in the 2020s, also aims to empower us and spotlight the groundbreaking music, art, movies, books, and activism we are creating.

This book is a cultural manifesto on the Gen Z girl. Our talents, struggles, and loves—and how what we watch, read, listen to, and talk about both help us survive and (literally) kill us. Gen Z women are reclaiming femininity in a new tint of pink. We can't win the game by rejecting femininity or by being feminine. So we have decided to embrace it in the ways that feel true to us: romance novels, sad pop music, rage, podcasts, cottagecore, movies. This decade, we've decided to burn the playbook and make our own. And I like to think you're holding it in your hands (or on your laptop, since, once again, it's 2026). We are building a world where we can be sad and wear pink, rage out, and read romance novels. Every woman matters; every woman forges her own definition. We can hold two truths simultaneously: the porcelain-perfect, pink image of the women of the past and the rageful, angry, sad, feral versions of ourselves. The contradiction is the point. It is our reality.

This isn't new. It feels impossible to be a woman in our society. It's gut-wrenching, no matter what position you're in. There's no way to win. No matter what profession you're in, what school you go to, where you live, who your parents are, or how you act, they're going to get you at some point. Modern womanhood is like an unbeatable game of Pac-Man: someone or something is always after you, trying to tear you down. So if they're going to make it a game, we can too. We don't have to whittle ourselves

down to the shape and character they want us to have—and the more we fight back, the stronger we become.

People used to think that social justice was an arrow heading to a target—that once we shot it down, we'd be done once and for all. We'd declare victory and fly our freedom flags! We'd ascend to a new ethical standard! But I've learned from the events and experiences in my life that justice is more like a race. A marathon, precisely. It doesn't get easier, but we get stronger. And we keep getting closer and closer. Closer to a goal that seemed unreachable to our grandmothers. Closer to a future where we feel free to express our desires: look the way we want to without being judged for it, make our decisions, and make our peace. I think to be a part of my generation, you have to be an expert at holding contradictions—you, by some impersonal stroke of fate, must reconcile the fact that the world is burning down, and also make money, and also somehow find the time for relationships, fun, and just generally staying alive in a world that wants to kill you because social media is mass murder. Oops, sorry, I won't go that far.

There is a pop-culture focus in many chapters of this book, and I learned through writing them that criticisms of women in the public eye are an amplified version of the criticisms women face in real life. Tabloids and online forum commenters have more space and courage to share what they really think, and this discourse offers insight into people's thoughts and feelings about women.

You might say that we are a hypersensitive, self-obsessed generation drunk on Starbucks oat milk. Tom Wolfe called the seventies, and in turn, the Boomers, the "Me Generation." The term described a generation that turned its focus inward to improving the self through psychedelics, spiritual awareness, and later consumerism. Gen Z, in turn, is the "Me Me Me Generation,"

with an asterisk: we also hate ourselves, so it's okay. Just like the Boomers, we find that our circumstances greatly shape our self-absorption and art.

We are also under more pressure, isolation, and crisis than any generation in recent history. This book isn't villainizing or romanticizing my generation. This book is humanizing us. This book is a work of nonfiction, but it's also a survival guide because no one besides overpriced therapists seems to care to sympathize with and question this generation of girls. That's why this book exists. I'm giving equal attention to TikTok trends and sociological theory, to ancient history and Netflix films.

To understand Gen Z girlhood, you must take into account a paradox: we are told women can be anything, but we don't see that represented in the real world. We are told women can be president, that we can have children and a career without insanity, that we are free now. And yet, in so many ways, we are not free. No one seems to talk about the massive difference between what we are told about women and how that differs from reality.

The contradictions and expectations of modern womanhood, the Modern Cage, as I call it, are built on this paradox: real world vs. reality. It's crazy-making to watch podcasters, politicians, and laws roll back our rights—and for many, strip away healthcare and safety—while being told we're 'girlbossing' through the pain. Instead of trying to escape the cage, as past generations of women once attempted, we are sitting inside it. We are embodying it. We are screaming and fighting and making music and activism and books, and yet, we are still here, locked inside this reality. That's what changed: we recognized that the cage is inescapable. And that's what this book is about: living inside it anyway.

I feel, as all perfectionists do, that what I have created is a mess. But I think it's also a sign of how adamantly our society

wants girls silenced. I am not claiming to have captured the entire conversation, nor to have mastered my prose style or to have all the right opinions (does that even exist?). I am initiating a conversation. This text is the start of what I hope will be a cascade of conversations among women—debates, changes, and questioning how we think, live, and are indoctrinated. It's not perfect, but it's a start. I won't let that perfectionism get in the way of sharing something important. Jack Kerouac once said, "first thought, best thought," and while I certainly revised this book, there's a decent amount that is untouched, vomited from the hellish pits of societal rage and personal memory. Something is fascinating to me about the idea of repurposing the liberties that male, patriarchal genius gets to take and using them to create something entirely new.

I want the intensity, density of reference, and audacity that women are discouraged from having in their writing. I think that's important for a few reasons: this is the opposite of an algorithmic text. It works the way a mind works: messily, confusingly, truly. In my opinion, there are no objective facts about culture. This is a single vantage point from an ongoing crisis. Growing up in the digital age is exactly the experience of reading this book. The Gen Z consciousness is fractured across time. So that's why I, having grown up with infinite tabs open on my laptop, will compare Tolstoy to Lana Del Rey, evolutionary biology to hockey romances. I enact the way we have all grown up in text form.

I have structured the following with a similar descent to Dante's Inferno: this book starts simple and relatively straightforward, but progressively gets worse and worse, culminating in a scream.

Chapter 1: The "Authentic" Pop Star
or: What's Real After Roe v. Wade?

❦

At the gender reveal party, pink confetti falls from the air. Dolls, frilly clothes, and pink toys are exchanged from relatives to parents. From the beginning of many of our lives, we are fed the idea of what it means to be a girl in a certain way. The color pink, which once dominated little girls' bedrooms in shades ranging from bubblegum to fuschia, is swept from a girl's life in middle school to stave off shame and embarrassment.

Gen Z girls have grown up in a relatively feminist world compared to previous generations. We get to work, vote, and speak freely. But beneath the surface, an interesting dichotomy was brewing. In the fight for equal rights, many women suppressed their femininity, thinking that the only way to be seen as equal was to become less feminine. There was a dialogue about inherent good and bad within those roles, and women were reinforcing it by stifling their desires to be girly, as our society views it.

Girlhood is the only uninhibited time in a female's life: a girl is not judged or ridiculed for her girlishness or lack thereof. That doesn't come until later.

Once the pre-teen years come around, being a girl is some-

thing to be ashamed of, we are told. Being a girl isn't virtuous like being a boy. "You're not like the other girls" is a compliment, and "girly girl" is an insult, hurled across the most revolting middle school cafeteria. The more a girl can blend into masculine activities, the more "cool" she will be viewed by her peers. Femininity is seen as shallow and unimportant, serving no role but infantilization and stupidity.

Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde* is considered cool only after she tones down the pink. At the outset, we're supposed to see her as unworthy. When she brings it back and remains successful, it's a radical statement, because she is what pop culture views as an oxymoron: a *feminine* career woman. Hollywood portrays successful women as cutthroat bosses with no interest in compassion. In Greta Gerwig's 2023 film *Barbie*, when the eponymous protagonist arrives in the "real world" clad in pink denim and roller skates, she is scoffed at. To be successful, one must tone down the feminine—but why?

Gen Z girls seemed to be following the same trajectory of pushing away the feminine. And then my generation experienced the first major setback in the fight for women's rights: in June 2022, our Supreme Court overturned a woman's constitutional right to an abortion. The state now owns American women's bodies. This is where I see this movement beginning. It was the start of a fight for women to be women: in every shape, form, and color (even pink). And my generation, Gen Z, now faced with more decisions than ever about how to be a woman in this world, is at the center.

On June 25, 2022, the Gen Z pop star Olivia Rodrigo was set to headline her show at the British music festival Glastonbury. The crowd preemptively roared with delight at the opening guitar lick of Rodrigo's pop/rock song *Brutal*. The day before, the Supreme Court had overturned *Roe v. Wade*. Rodrigo decided

to bring out Brit-pop star Lily Allen to sing one of her hit songs from 2008, *Fuck You*. "I'm devastated and terrified," she said as she graced the stage in a purple ensemble before a crowd of thousands. "So many women and so many girls are going to die because of this. I wanted to dedicate this next song to the five members of the Supreme Court who have shown us that, at the end of the day, they truly don't give a shit about freedom. The song is for the justices: Samuel Alito, Clarence Thomas, Neil Gorsuch, Amy Coney Barrett, Brett Kavanaugh. We hate you! We hate you."

That day, the song, which Allen had once ascribed to Trump and his radical right anti-feminist values, became about much more than one person. It was about every decision that had been made to put women down for being in control of themselves and their bodies. And it harbored a key mood of my generation's girls: rage. This emotion was beginning to find a new voice, someone who could articulate the unique angst of the moment. Just a month earlier, a relatively unknown artist had opened for Rodrigo at her San Francisco show. Her name was Chappell Roan.

At the time, Chappell was working on what would become her first album, *The Rise and Fall of a Midwest Princess*, and had only released a few singles in her new style, including the uproarious disco-pop anthem *Pink Pony Club*." It hinted at her humble beginnings as a girl growing up in the Midwest. Chappell, whose birth name was Kayleigh Rose Amstutz, moved from a small town outside Springfield, Missouri, to Los Angeles in the mid-2010s to pursue her dreams as a singer-songwriter. When she visited The Abbey, a gay bar in West Hollywood, she was inspired to write the song. Chappell told *Headliner* that she "always had such a hard time being myself and felt like I'd be judged for being different or being creative," and that the

bar was "something that I couldn't really have experienced here in Missouri... It was completely eye-opening and changed my direction from that point on."

In the song, she belts out lyrics that evoke both empowerment and hesitation, igniting a similar light in all of us. We all want to find a place where we can be accepted for everything we are, as cliché as that may seem. And every person has doubts about meeting their parents' expectations. The specificity of Roan's experience only makes the song more relatable.

In April 2020, the song was released (unfortunate timing), by Atlantic Records, which then dropped her for not being profitable enough. She moved back to Missouri and worked the drive-through window at a coffee kiosk. Then she came back to Los Angeles, taking jobs as a nanny, production assistant, and at a donut shop.

But she hit her stride when she released *Naked in Manhattan* (the buzzing 80s synth-pop anthem) and *Femininomenon* (the off-the-wall exploration of ditching men for women). Her brand was not only an entire aesthetic, but a world to explore: an over-the-top, liberated, pink, thrifted atmosphere, full of dizzying pop culture references and slightly intimidating bravado. Quite simply, Chappell had become the culture. After releasing several more songs, each with its own cinematic (and dramatic) music videos and her own YMCA-esque dance craze (*HOT TO GO!*), Chappell released her debut album.

The Rise and Fall of a Midwest Princess was a genre-spanning evolution of relationships and expectations, and most notably an exploration of Chappell's persona, an expansive, multidimensional stage presence. It was as if a rapidly exploding bomb had been dropped on pop culture. And with the blink of an eye, she became referenced in every cultural sphere. How did that happen?

Chappell Roan was born to Dwight and Kara Amstutz in February 1998 and lived in a Missouri trailer park for her first years. Dwight was a nurse, Kara was a veterinarian, and Chappell was the oldest of their four children. She was raised in a conservative Christian milieu where "being gay was bad and a sin, she told FOX News. "It's really encouraged to take on the role of a wife and mother. There's this mentality that a woman should be treated like a princess, but also she should be a cook, a cleaner, a driver, and so on."

Chappell spent her childhood forcing herself into a mold she couldn't fit into. She grew up thinking that her future was getting married right out of high school, having babies by 23, and attending church in gingham house dresses several times a week.

Little did she know that in a matter of years, she'd be singing to crowds of thousands of people in a drag costume. But instead of shutting out her background, she had made it clear that family doesn't have to share the same political beliefs: "I have family that is very Republican, and they love me, and I love them." She keeps the Midwest with her: she appreciates many parts of it, including the nature, simple farm life, and the trailer park. It's notable and telling that she doesn't shut out a part of her that was so integral just because of its complexity.

Roan started taking piano lessons at age 12, and by age 15, she was uploading her videos to YouTube, which drew attention from several record labels. The Interlochen School for the Arts, an arts camp and school, "changed [her] trajectory forever," and that's where she wrote her debut single, *Die Young*. She signed with Atlantic Records in 2015, changing her name from Kayleigh Rose to Chappell Roan in honor of her grandfather Dennis Chappell's favorite song, *The Strawberry Roan*. She gained some critical acclaim for her songs and EP *School Nights*. "I was a depressed, sad teenager, and it reflected that," she recently said

of her early career, and described the sound as "witchy and dark." She opened for several artists, including Declan McKenna and Vance Joy, during this time, honing her performance craft.

It was in 2018 when Roan began working with her producer, Dan Nigro, with whom she created all of her well-known songs. After the release of *Pink Pony Club* and her subsequent parting from Atlantic, Nigro's focus shifted to Olivia Rodrigo's 2021 album *SOUR*, which earned them several #1 hits. Meanwhile, Chappell was serving hot coffee, scrubbing floors, and passing out donuts while working slowly on her music. Following its release, Roan's album appeared on multiple year-end lists, including those of Vogue, Time, Nylon, Billboard, and Rolling Stone. The album has back-to-back impeccable pop songs, from the charismatically flirtatious *HOT TO GO!* to the sinister but flawlessly catchy *My Kink is Karma*.

Her lyrics often center on crushes, relationships, breakups, empowerment, or revenge, and her funny quips catch you off guard. *Femininomenon*, the wild dual ballad/EDM song which references the pizza chain Papa John's (no, I didn't make that up), is the dynamic opener. There are only a few sad songs on the album; while they are good, they don't capture as much of the fans' or the public's imagination. As the praise grew and grew, Roan found it harder and harder to handle the pressures that came with fame.

Olivia Rodrigo was integral to Chappell's success: along with opening for her *SOUR* tour, Chappell also opened for Rodrigo's *GUTS* tour. In the first weekend of opening, her streams rose by 32%. This was because of her newly released song, "*Good Luck, Babe!*", which she performed and promoted on tour. The song is about compulsory heterosexuality but also

includes the age-old theme of an unloving partner. "You can kiss a hundred boys in bars, shoot another shot, try to stop the

feeling," she sings against warping synths. In the bridge, she mentions her ex's retreat into compulsory heterosexuality: "When you wake up next to him in the middle of the night / With your head in your hands, you're nothing more than his wife."

The song is infectious and danceable, and the lyric video features a PowerPoint presentation with Comic Sans and graphics, one of which still has the Shutterstock logo. Can you imagine any other artist doing that?

In this way, Chappell is rejecting a modern sensibility to pop, ditching autotune and creating videos that harken back to the 80s and early 2000s, making us all feel nostalgic for a period we never lived through (as adults, anyway). *Good Luck Babe* was an immediate hit, peaking at #4 on the Billboard Hot 100 and racking up a billion streams months after its release. To crib off of one of her lyrics, "you'd have to stop the world just to stop the streaming…"

With her subsequent singles, including *The Giver* and *The Subway*, Roan continued to develop her distinctive visual style. In *The Subway*'s music video (unrelated to the sandwich chain), she follows a phantom girl through New York. Striking moments include scenes with rats crawling through her hair, swimming in the Washington Square Park fountain, and sulking on the subway—she's a red-headed Rapunzel haunted by what could've been. Her wild "fuck it" attitude leaks into the lyrics, too: "I made a promise if in four months, this feeling ain't gone/ Well, fuck this city, I'm moving to Saskatchewan," she sings. Yes, the answer to heartbreak for Chappell Roan is getting a fresh start in Canada. That's a fantasy of many Americans right now…

Chappell is one of the few modern artists to create impactful, memorable in-person performances. In June 2024, she dressed up as the Statue of Liberty to perform at Gov Ball. She made her entrance inside a candy red apple that cracked open (her

second homage to New York City). She changed into a strapless taxi costume, skin still painted pale green from the previous set. She recited the poem etched on the symbolic statue: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." She then explained her take on the poem, which reflected women's and LGBTQ+ rights, as well as freedom for all people in oppressed groups.

The moment came from the outfits, but the message came from her consistent usage of her platform to do good, not just to entertain. When she dressed up as Joan of Arc, it was a statement, not just a performance. Armed with a sword and gleaming armor and in front of a castle erupting in flames, Roan called back to a moment 600 years before, when Joan of Arc was held prisoner and burned alive after standing up for her country. The fact that she had once cross-dressed as a man was later used against her in the trial. Some have pointed out that Roan may also have been referencing Julie d'Aubigny, a queer French opera singer from the 1600s, who was infamous for not only having the "most beautiful voice in the world" but for having set a convent on fire while having lesbian relationships. The key to Roan's success isn't the spectacle; it's the meaning behind it. By utilizing history and notable symbols and figures, she makes it clear that her art is more than a passing trend: it's a movement.

On that same night, as Roan appeared visibly uncomfortable on the red carpet, a reporter could be heard telling her to "shut the **** up." She then snapped at them, saying, "YOU shut the f*** up. Don't! Not me, b****." Excuse my language, but it's hard to find a way to describe this situation without resorting to my generation's common vocabulary (expletives). Her outspoken behavior isn't usually how celebrities act on the red carpet, so naturally, there was some online backlash, which made me wonder: why do we care so much about whether famous women are

nice? They make great art and entertain us, but why do they have to be nice? This is widely accepted for men. "Artists are self-centered jerks; it doesn't matter as long as they make great art." Why can't it be that way for women? Why do we care so much about so-called "bad" behavior? Is it because being feminine closely aligns with being "good" or morally righteous? Or perhaps our culture sees all women as virginal mothers (yet another oxymoron) who must uphold the moral standards of motherhood by being nurturing and empathetic to everyone. Either way, a woman must be good in more ways than one, which ends up belittling us and taking away our right to stand up for ourselves. Maybe ingraining the "good girl" moral into all of us is yet another dimension of patriarchal control.

In an interview with *The Guardian*, Roan snapped back, saying: "I'm very turned off by the celebrity of it all. Some girls have been in this so long that they're used to that, but I'm not that girl. I'm not gonna be a sweetie pie to a man who's telling me to shut the f*** up." She continued: "They think I'm complaining about my success. I'm complaining about being abused." Chappell has been outspoken about how much being famous bothers her, and she has said that she doesn't want to talk to or interact with fans outside of work.

"Women do not owe you a reason why they don't want to be touched or talked to. I want to love my life, be outside, giggle with my friends, go to the movie theater, feel safe, and do everything every single person deserves to do. There is a part of myself that I save just for my project and all of you. There is a part of myself that is just for me, and I don't want that taken away," she said on her social media. She has said repeatedly that she won't do brand deals unless they fit with her music and who she is, stating plainly: "Fuck H&M." She showcased her irrev-

erent attitude even further by refusing to endorse either side of the 2024 election, saying: "There are problems on both sides." Nicole Dominique wrote for *Evie Magazine*: "To me, Chappell isn't weak like people say—she's *real*, something we desperately need more of. If there's one thing I've learned from her rise to fame, it's that staying true to yourself is a bigger risk than conforming. And if standing up for yourself, challenging the narrative, and calling out hypocrisy makes you a "diva" in the eyes of many, then maybe we need more divas like Chappell Roan."

So many people in the public eye (and people you see on the street) are not themselves. They are inauthentic robot zombies living entirely as someone else, partly because of social media's influence and partly because they may not feel accepted for who they are. That is not Chappell Roan.

Having taken into account that the internet has been around for decades now and that my generation of girls grew up with it, we have developed a sensitivity to fakeness. Whether or not that radar is accurate is not the point. But we want to see something genuine, something real. We are constantly bombarded with fake images, stories, videos, and content. It has been so hard to figure out what's actually real in the media when stars mimic trends and become strategically vulnerable to win our attention.

Chappell is the antithesis of this. She is an unfiltered woman, not the bikini-wearing, suntanned Aveeno endorser you see on social media. She wants you to know that you're normal, too—and you don't have to put up with uncomfortable treatment.

In the tabloid era of the 2000s, famous women were shamed and put down for showing any semblance of realness. For going out partying with friends, for "stealing someone's boyfriend," for being too slutty, for being too skinny, for being too fat, for lip-syncing, and for singing about sex. It was all a nonstop parade of criticism, written in sprawling all-caps yellow font

in the *National Enquirer*. It begs the question: if celebrities are "just like us" and *they're* expected to be perfect, are we supposed to be flawless too?

Roan's public image reminds me of Fiona Apple's in the late 1990s. They both canceled shows for mental health, disobeyed the "good girl" standard, and set fire to the music industry. Apple, accepting an award onstage at the VMAS, said something that echoes in Chappell Roan's statements about her boundaries around fame nearly 30 years later: "This world is bullshit." After scattered and confused applause, she continued. "You shouldn't model your life about what you think that we think is cool and what we're wearing and what we're saying and everything. Go with yourself." Following the speech, Apple received enough criticism to last her a lifetime. Her brazen take on the "broken" industry sent the media into a tailspin, and they began calling her all sorts of things, from on the spectrum and deplorably ungrateful to gaunt and malnourished—and her career never quite recovered.

She fell into the "bad girl" category that so many women in music had been forced into before, and she was never able to retain the same amount of attention or popularity. Her manic sincerity and unabashed frankness uncovered new layers of commentary on society that only fully landed with some. Perhaps because we just weren't ready at the time. But we're ready now.

What I've noticed with Chappell is that the criticism cannot penetrate her public image. People criticize relentlessly, but her popularity has not faded from any scandal she's had so far. It's not that people don't care about scandal anymore (they do). Still, we realize, partially, now, that women don't deserve incessant cruelty for being unfiltered or having problems (and cellulite) like a normal human. Maybe it was the pandemic, maybe it was #MeToo, maybe it was Instagram or TikTok. The source doesn't

matter as much as the fact that Chappell Roan would never have happened in the 2000s. And the difference is us. Chappell has been repeatedly criticized for saying she fits into "both sides" of the political spectrum and for not being up to date on politics. Authenticity cuts both ways: when an artist truly doesn't care about their image or how people see them, like Chappell, it's okay to be one of the biggest queer artists and not take a political stance. Is that authenticity or just laziness? That's the issue with being a pop star: walking the line between calculated and uncaring. "Why are you looking to me for some political answer? I'm a pop star. I wish I had the answers." No one's looking to her to become our next president. The queer community just wants one of their few representatives to actually speak their language and care about their everyday lives. "Both sides," for queer kids in Alabama, doesn't feel like authenticity. It feels like obliviousness. And yet she remains popular because the music is good, and maybe because it's kind of relatable to us that she doesn't have her shit together.

Gen Z, at the core, is a profoundly skeptical cohort. Our main question when consuming art, making friends, or approaching life in general is: What is real? How can we determine what's real in a world where everything is calculated for attention, generated automatically, paid for, and rigged? Our inherent skepticism breeds celebrities who not only make raw art but also have raw public personas. Unpolished, less media-trained (although still media-trained, since they're celebrities), and therefore more susceptible to controversy. When you're honest, say what you mean, and share your most vulnerable emotions and rage with the public, you'll inevitably face backlash. But you get backlash from being calculated, as well. So the question for artists should not be how to avoid cancellation (that's impossible), but rather which way they want to present themselves. Fake or real?

Engineered, or authentic?

The raw honesty most of us crave from our pop stars results in an onslaught of contradictions. The kind of people who will stand up to corporate authority and say and act how they want are often people with inner demons, internal struggles, contradictory realities, and beliefs. If we want authenticity, we have to take the other side of the coin. The new version of fame cashes in on likability for reality.

Speaking of the "raw" version of fame, Roan also reminds me of the rock stars and confessional poets we saw in the 1960s and '70s (Jimi Hendrix, Sid Barrett, even Sylvia Plath). These artists came from a time before optimization was the primary driving force in pop culture, before we wanted to make absolutely everything as profitable and viral as possible. There's also a hint of Kurt Cobain in her determination towards the persona, the irony, the cyclical nature of madness. I think the reason she stands out in the age of the Taylor Swift-esque, impeccably calculated, shiny, PR-managed pop star is that she's an unadulterated artist. She's pure tempest, and as a female artist with bipolar disorder (which Roan also struggles with), I see the perks it brings in an era so starving for zest and grittiness. It's not a factory; it's a hypomanic brain—and if we want that kind of truth, it comes with sacrifices the online zeitgeist might not be ready to make.

For my generation of girls, her music feels like liberation, something to call our own, whether or not we identify with her circumstances or problems. Her music is something we all share. We don't want a leader, but a peer. So next time you hear her music pumped up on party speakers, notice what reaction the women have. It's a total liberation feeling. I'm not exactly sure why; maybe it's her lyrics, which have an inherently singable

quality, maybe it's her performances, magnetic and distinctive, or maybe it's simply her way of being. Her imperfections and idiosyncrasies make her like all of us, and yet unlike any of us at the same time.

Many generations of women before us turned to boy bands and male rock stars in their youth. But it seems that now my generation has a different kind of musical admiration: woman-to-woman empowerment from within. No one ever knows what a musical artist will do; trying to predict that is like trying to predict where Banksy will strike next. There's just no way to know. But even if Chappell Roan retired now, she'd still have that place in our culture and in our hearts, even if it was just a brief moment of liberation. But it might last a while. On my walk, I see someone changing the tires on their bike in their front yard, listening to "Pink Pony Club."

"Great song!" I yell. "Chappell Roan, right? She's great." They reply. I get dinner, and I hear "My Kink is Karma" coming from a car speeding down the block. I go out into the world and hear people talking about her. It doesn't look like it's stopping anytime soon.

This is liberation that we desperately need because of the losses we've recently faced for women all over the world. Pop culture permeates every sphere of American life, especially for women. "Whether we're talking about race or gender or class, popular culture is where the pedagogy is; it's where the learning is," cultural critic bell hooks said in an interview. She argued that studying popular culture is one of the only ways to truly know our society. While many call pop culture frivolous and say it doesn't reflect the wider problems around the world, I say that disregarding the media most Americans obsess over, consume, and reflect on for 11 hours a day (a statistic that scares me) is a mistake. We should be spending more time with each

other. Less time-consuming media, but as long as we're consuming it and it's not going to change, there's so much we can get out of it—including acute commentary on the state of women in this world: something as far from frivolous as you can get. I'm acknowledging that pop culture is minuscule compared to worldwide women's rights struggles, and yet critiquing it because the air around us tells us so much about whose voices are heard, the female psyche, and what comfort and authenticity feel like in this day and age.

My generation of girls' attitudes toward feminism and women can't be distilled into a single defining characteristic. Still, popular culture has shown me that, right now, feminism is all about embracing the feminine. If you can call it a movement, my generation is all about supporting every type of woman and every type of femininity. Whether you are queer, trans, or straight, we're all women. This is about being mad and expressing our rage, not pushing down how we feel. And what makes it different from previous generations of girls? We might still be figuring that out, but the things that most clearly separate us from our mothers are social media and its antithesis, just as present is our embrace of honesty amongst the lies. You'll notice that most women in my generation are (or want to be) truly honest about how they feel on a range of topics, from politics to music to sex. You could argue that social media has opened a platform for these emotions that weren't acceptable before. This movement is also about being mad and expressing our rage, not denying how we feel. It's a new version of femininity, one as multifaceted as our options, and as simple as the statement: be the woman you want to be.

Concurrently, the rise of "Sapphic pop" (this pertains to Chappell Roan) has brought a new type of woman into the mainstream. Even if you aren't queer, this new, historically

preyed-upon group (lesbians) being brought out so defiantly in the past couple of years has encouraged us all not to feel that we have to fit into the expectations society demands of us, and that it's better to defy standards when they don't reflect our reality.

In pop music, many others are doing similar things to Chappell, including the rapper Doechii, who has recently gained popularity. "Rap is about having heart," she told Rolling Stone. "It's not about a formula. It was never about that. It's about us expressing ourselves freely." In the interview, she eloquently explains how she rejects the label telling her how to make her music, or even how to sequence it. "They said, We put the hits at the top, bigger songs, more commercial songs at the top, give them something creative in the middle…' I denounce all formulas right now. Let's do what feels good." Doechii's attitude towards her music comes out in the lyrics, where she talks a lot about the expectations her label and manager put on her music and career. Backing up, I think it's helpful to explain the gap she fills in the market.

Audiences are looking for fresh, authentic storytelling, which has been missing from music for a long time, according to many. Doechii fills that gap, creating artful music and music videos (a medium many artists neglect). For example, her music video for "Denial is a River" featured a retro sitcom set and several guest stars, harkening back to the must-watch television era of the '80s and '90s.

"Denial is a River" is compulsively watchable and interesting because it brings creativity to the table. She infuses her lyrics with exactly how she feels and tells you how she got there. It's true: rappers can express themselves much more in their lyrics because the genre lends itself to it. But as her popularity has risen, it's become apparent that her vulnerability is relevant and modern– discussing drugs, money, sex, and power in new ways

no one has heard expressed so bluntly before.

People are resonating with it because sometimes someone else can say exactly what you were too scared to say out loud. There's no need to do any digging to find out who she is, because it's simple: "As this multifaceted rapper. I'm alternative, kind of nerdy, super sexy, kind of awkward, conscious, but also I'm twerking and ass-shaking. It's just this ball of everything I represent, down to my aesthetic. That's why I'm bringing something new. I believe I'm the future, because I'm me," she told *Paper Magazine*.

On the cover of that publication, she dressed as a man, complete with a six-pack and prosthetics. She made up a character for him: Ricardo from Panama. She is a self-proclaimed "theater kid," and playing with character has always been her passion. Born and raised in Tampa, Florida, she grew up performing ballet, tap dancing, acting, doing gymnastics, and cheerleading. She began writing rap (and poetry) in her teen years and started releasing songs in the mid-2010s. Then came her EP, *Oh the Places You'll Go*, which *Rolling Stone* described as a blend of pop, hip hop, and dance. She continued to rise in popularity in 2021 and 2022, being nominated at the VMAs and signing with Capitol Records. She even made her acting debut amid all of this in the independent film *Earth Mama* in 2023.

Like Chappell, she has a single dominant visual aesthetic: the "Swamp Princess." Her music and fashion feel like a '90s Florida daydream. "Sometimes, that means she's a swamp girl who wears trucker hats, cropped tops, gator-textured boots, and cargo shorts. Other times, she's a studious girl rocking striped polo shirts, sweater vests, and pencil skirts. Either way, she's unapologetic," Gina Cherelus wrote for the *New York Times*. Doechii's mixtape, *Alligator Bites Never Heal*, features a striking cover in which, against a forest-green background, she looks into

the camera, holding a white alligator. I think of Doechii as one of the up-and-coming stars helping to redefine femininity in the public eye, mostly because she has carved out an entirely new style—a new version of womanhood, distinctly suited to her personality and goals—and "unapologetic" is the perfect word for it.

It's a radical statement for a Black woman to be unapologetic, a middle finger to expectations of perfection, polish, or catering to demographics that expect a very narrow version of femininity or Blackness. By leaning into something historically seen as "dirty"—her "swamp" aesthetic—she's not just being authentic, but she's subverting and reclaiming everything that popular music is supposed to mean. While holding an alligator. It is kind of impossible not to love her.

Looking back at previous eras, many artists felt they had to emulate the most popular figures in the mainstream. When Britney Spears emerged, the copycats followed. Madonna and Cyndi Lauper had copycats, and so did the Beatles. But nowadays it seems like we have a better radar for when somebody is truly expressing themselves through music, which has led to a renaissance of different personalities mixing. Maybe it's representative of our views on women and the fact that there are so many versions of femininity that are widely seen as acceptable.

In the beginning of this chapter, I discussed Olivia Rodrigo's reaction to Roe v. Wade—but her involvement in women's rights goes much further than that, from her music to her donations. Billed as a pop star on the edge of punk, Rodrigo is no stranger to expressing rage, whether towards an ex or towards society. On her first album, *SOUR*, she wrote about social media comparison in "Jealousy, Jealousy": "I kinda wanna throw my phone across the room/'Cause all I see are girls too good to be true/

With paper-white teeth and perfect bodies/Wish I didn't care." This track resonated with so many young girls, and while it wasn't a single, it had a big impact.

The irony is that Olivia Rodrigo is a stereotypically attractive and thin woman who has a presence on social media that might make other girls feel the same way. While she certainly can't be blamed for those things, it adds a level of complexity to the situation. On her next album, GUTS, she wrote about female physical expectations in Pretty Isn't Pretty: "And I bought all the clothes that they told me to buy/I chased some dumb ideal my whole fucking life/And none of it matters, and none of it ends/You just feel like shit over and over again."

I never expected a popular pop song to get into the woes of capitalism and advertising. Still, by speaking about this to her mostly female audience, she's teaching us that we all need to get our values straight when it comes to young women. The lyrics refer to the never-ending chase for beauty standards that continuously change: one day your body type might be "trending," and the next day it's the exact opposite. It's sickening that our society views the female body as a trend, just like an article of clothing, that can cycle in and out of fashion. I would even liken it to the struggle for abortion rights: society wants to own our bodies. In this song, Rodrigo references skipping meals, buying a ton of makeup, and getting a prescription for anxiety: three things Gen Z girls are all too familiar with. It's these songs that make Rodrigo one of the most prominent voices of our generation. Once again, you know somebody is a visionary when they say something you've been thinking all along, but never said aloud.

The special thing about Olivia Rodrigo is that she knows how to draw rage from her audience, attracting mobs of teenage girls who scream in a packed arena about similar problems. In conjunction with her *GUTS* world tour, she launched a charity,

Fund 4 Good, which is a "global initiative committed to building an equitable and just future for all women, girls, and people seeking reproductive health freedom." For the US leg, she partnered with the National Network of Abortion Funds to ensure that women most affected by misogyny, racism, and healthcare barriers can get the care they deserve. For the subsequent legs, the partners were Women's Shelters Canada and Women Against Violence Europe. In St. Louis, Missouri, and for several shows in America, contraceptives were handed out at the shows: "Concertgoers were able to grab a package that includes two boxes of Julie—an emergency contraceptive that helps prevent pregnancy when taken within 72 hours of unprotected sex—as well as cards with QR codes linking to abortion access resources and the Missouri Abortion Fund," *Variety* reported. "Fans also reported free condoms and stickers being passed out." However, this stopped midway through the American leg for unknown reasons, though it seems likely that the anti-abortion laws in many US states played a role. While writing her second album, Olivia Rodrigo took a poetry class and began reading Joan Didion. In one of Didion's books, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, an exploration of 1960s California culture, she quotes someone who says the phrase "All American Bitch." Inspired by this, Rodrigo wrote a satire on the expectations placed on women: "I am light as a feather/I'm as fresh as the air/Coca-Cola bottles that I only use to curl my hair/I got class and integrity/Just like a goddamn Kennedy/I swear." You might be wondering why a pop star would need to study literature and history to make great music, but this is present in everyone I've talked about in this chapter. They've found a way to infuse intellectual content into their artistry, making their art all the more meaningful and timely. Rodrigo, who is Filipina-American, became a Disney Channel star in her early teens and struggled with not feeling

"palatable" enough for mainstream media. There's a special irony about satirizing a category she didn't feel fully admitted to: acknowledging that she didn't feel seen in media as a kid, and even today, when she stands onstage in front of thousands of people, there's still a part of her that, according to the music industry, will never be "all-American."

The perfect American woman is depicted in this song as an unachievable goal that Rodrigo wrestles with daily. Most women feel misplaced in American society at some point, like they're doing something wrong for not fitting every expectation. Women are held on a pedestal of glory, but once a mistake is made, the flawless image is shattered, and all that's left is a scared, confused girl who doesn't know how to please anyone. I noticed when I did a deep dive on all these musicians that each one is a rebel in their artistry. From Chappell to Doechii to Olivia Rodrigo, it seems that the one thing my generation really wants in their music is rebellion. This is present even in the most predictable of pop stars like Sabrina Carpenter, a 5'0 blonde pop goddess whose rebellion is her irreverent (and often salacious) sense of humor.

For any popular artist, the purpose of their music is usually to help people let go. There are so many stressors and expectations on us in this modern world, from the climate crisis to simply paying your rent. Music helps us release stress and pressure. For a moment, we aren't uptight or worried. We're immersed in a world of bright colors, synths, and sounds that take us to another place. The resurgence of the concert post-pandemic is an example of this. Aside from the natural urge for people to be together in community, which a concert temporarily satisfies, concerts and music are places where you're not focusing on yourself but on something larger. The concept of a "third place," coined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg, is becoming increasingly

relevant. Our first place is our home, our second is our work, and our third is a place where we can gather to interact, be in community, and be spontaneous. Concerts have become that place for many people, and so has music as a whole.

So much of pop culture now focuses on young women, from books to podcasters to pop stars. We have the power to reclaim control over what it really means to be female. Even when people actively try to take it away from us, we still have control. There's still a long way to go until young women can be completely free. But in the meantime, we are creating art that showcases who we really are as people and who we want to be. And if that isn't feminism, what is?

Chapter 2: Barbie
or: How The Film Industry Demolished the Feral Female Character

❦

"I know you want me to tear my clothes off so you can look at your fifty cents' worth. Fifty cents for the privilege of staring at a girl the way your wives won't let you!"

—Maureen O'Hara, 1940, Dance, Girl, Dance

"It is literally impossible to be a woman... It's too hard! It's too contradictory, and nobody gives you a medal or says thank you! And it turns out, in fact, that not only are you doing everything wrong, but also everything is your fault."

—America Ferrera, 2023, Barbie

When I first saw Barbie, the entire theater was filled with women wearing pink. There were girls from ages 4 to 18, and the oldest woman there was probably in her 80s or 90s. And most, if not all of them, had pink accessories or clothes. A pink fanny pack,

a Barbie shirt, sequin minidresses. It was akin to a pop-culture church, and over the 114 minutes we were in that theater, all of us laughed, cried, and thought about what it really meant to be a woman (okay, maybe not the 4-year-olds).

There were girls my age, there with their mothers, just as I was. We watched as Sasha, America Ferrera's daughter in the movie, struggled with her mother, ultimately portraying the realities of modern motherhood. Half of us likely weren't expecting this from a film about a plastic pink doll, but that's part of the charm. Over the last 65 years, Barbie has defined and defied sexism and femininity. It's no coincidence that the doll was born in 1959 and became popular during the early stages of Second Wave feminism.

I cried during America Ferrera's monologue. Not because I hadn't heard these contradictions more eloquently spoken before. But because they were being spoken to so many women who'd never even learned the concept of double standards. The film felt like a monolith, a culmination of everything women were screaming into the ether, fashionably branded as a doll movie by one of America's biggest corporations. It was a paradox that made me question everything I know about film. Can a film about a plastic doll be the feminist statement of a generation?

I stayed in the theater after watching Barbie for the second time. Two women are in front of me: Hazel and Monique. Hazel wears a pink sequin fanny pack and owned a Sun Jewel Barbie as a kid. She went to three Taylor Swift concerts and posted about them all on her TikTok, wearing custom friendship bracelets. Monique is wearing a zebra sweatshirt: she's a little more outspoken than Hazel, posts thousands of words about films on Letterboxd, and takes feminist and socialist theory classes at her local community college. "What'd you think?" Monique asks Hazel. "The monologue made me cry, oh my God," Hazel

says. "And I'm totally going to buy the Barbie album at Barnes & Noble. Did *you* like it?" I decided to stay and listen to their thoughts.

Field research, why not? I'm in the back of the theater as the lights turn on, squinting, listening. They're talking loudly, so I don't feel like an eavesdropper. "It's corporate white feminism," Monique says. "It's trying to capitalize on female rage and put it in a doll pink box. You can't really make a movie that's actually about feminism called Barbie. I mean, come on! But I gotta say, Weird Barbie made me go feral." Hazel scowls. "I don't get it. It's corporate, but it's still feminism! It's still accepting of all women!" She retorts.

"Hazel. You can't make a feminist movie in a patriarchal system. Mattel shaped impossible beauty standards and perceptions of women for forever, and now they think they can make tons of money out of woke-ifying a doll and adding a Dua Lipa song? So many women felt wrong just for existing because of Barbie. They can't take that back. They're, like, a patriarchal company worth billions of dollars. They should give that money to women struggling in low-income countries instead of making plastic consumerist films." Hazel laughed. "Isn't it better to have representation at all? The fact that there's a movie with this many diverse women talking about these subjects… isn't that a contribution to our world? Barbie's going to teach so many women that they're valuable."

Monique laughed. "It's gonna teach some women that they're valuable, and leave other women in the dark. Plus, it's preachy. Overly political."

"Agree to disagree," Hazel said. "Let's go to *Oppenheimer* now."

I walked out of the theater with them, throwing away my popcorn. Despite the two completely valid sides to the argument, I was glad it sparked a debate at all. Most people aren't

even consuming the same content, let alone arguing about it. We need to talk about the subconscious messages that enter our minds with every swipe on our phones. This was the start of something bigger. A bigger conversation about women onscreen: the first "women's picture" in a long time, I thought to myself.

From the 1930s through the 1960s, a specific genre was more widely seen than any other of its kind. The woman's picture. The kind of film that women would go to with their wild friend group during the Depression to get a break, the kind of film that would make them feel alive during domesticity, complex during unsettling sociopolitical times. This genre, which started with pre-code films in the 1930s, is my area of expertise and was incredibly popular for multiple reasons. One, women were a massive, active film-going audience. In her 1939 book, *America at the Movies*, Margaret Thorp noted that far more adult women than men attended the movies. Entertaining women meant showcasing women, who were approximately seventy percent of movie-going audiences at the time. And unlike today, the women onscreen were not simple. They were morally complex, overtly sexual; they approached pregnancy, working life, romance, politics, and fashion with equal bravado. These films, especially in the 1930s and 1940s, were a voice for an entire generation, an entire era of women working, struggling, and living in America. American film was vital to female recognition, to female survival. Whether it was a film showcasing a female businesswoman, head of a car company, prostitute, restaurant owner, or toothpaste saleswoman (all real examples), films during these 20 years served one purpose: to make money for the studios. And what made money for the studios was what resonated with women.

Nowadays, the pipeline is muddied by social media, streaming, political views, budget restrictions, and countless other obstacles. Back then, studios were set up to tell stories.

Sometimes these stories were box-office failures, and sometimes they struck a chord profoundly—studios were, overall, more willing to make that gamble.

These powerful women onscreen and their moral ambiguity during this period are what inspired me to write my first book, *Old Films, Young Eyes: A Teenage Take On Hollywood's Golden Age*, because the gap between what I saw on screen in the 2020s and the archival films I binged from the 1930s was profound. Not just in the political environment and social norms, but in the ways women were allowed to be onscreen. Loud, confident, bossy, arrogant, fashionable, masculine, feminine, sexual, and everything in between. Nowadays, while many films pass the Bechdel test, most female characters in mainstream films (excluding indie and low-budget films) are manic-pixie dream girls or Mary Sues. The same archetype over and over again. You know her: usually white, usually hetero, usually beautiful, usually a hopeless romantic. (Of course, there's a diverse best friend to "balance it out.") She's sad about breakups but not mentally ill about them. She's a career girl but doesn't put her career over much else. She doesn't have many strong opinions or questionable morals; she's just *there*. For the male gaze, for the audience.

I sort of feel bad for her in some ways: she doesn't get to have the highs and lows that an intense or neurodivergent woman would have. She's not a genius; she has no particular talent (except she might do Pilates), and the only engine in her story is, you guessed it! A man.

Twenty-first-century cinema has turned women into concepts rather than people. And it's boring. Anyone but you, The Summer I Turned Pretty, Purple Hearts, The Time Traveler's Wife, The Age of Adaline, To All the Boys, The Kissing Booth, The Amazing Spider-Man. They're literally all the same person. We lost the complexity: business owners, murderers, social

climbers, cross-dressers, morally complex, still women, still worthy, still commercial.

I missed real women onscreen. These women are available at Sundance, Tribeca, indie archives, and in pre-code, mid-century cinema. But that's not where most film-goers are looking. They're perusing Netflix, going to theaters a few times a year, and learning about films through TikTok-viral costar press drama. So the complex, possibly unlikable, dynamic female character is much harder to find in the 21st century. What would *The Summer I Turned Pretty* look like if Belly were an elite rock climber? What if she had generational trauma? What if she made impulsive, irrational decisions? The things that made films interesting in the mid-20th century now make them "controversial" or "hard to bet on" for big corporations. And it's ironic, because Amazon has more money and less to lose than RKO Studios did in the 1930s. The attention economy, what people watch, and what people expect have changed. In my opinion, this change has made cinema worse.

In 1933's *Baby Face*, lead actress Barbara Stanwyck takes 70 minutes to slap men, spill hot coffee, follow Nietzsche's philosophy of "using men to get what she wants," and seduce her way up an entire class ecosystem while feeling no guilt. In *The Summer I Turned Pretty*, Belly struggles to choose between two attractive men she grew up with while attending college, all while facing the threat of losing a multimillion-dollar beach house. Which narrative is more interesting? Which narrative is safer? 1930s cinema taught women through the screen that they could be whoever they wanted. We teach women through Amazon Prime that all the drama and purpose in their lives should revolve around a single love triangle.

I'm not attacking The Summer I Turned Pretty: it serves its purpose, can be incredibly fun to watch, and is genuinely engag-

ing at times. It's practically the *I Love Lucy* of the internet age, with the number of viewers who tune in. But it's undeniably an example of how the "women's picture" has been sanitized.

In *Mildred Pierce*, Joan Crawford becomes a successful restaurant chain owner to prove her worth to her daughter, then enables her own daughter's cruelty and abuse, frames her friend for murder, and attempts suicide.

In *Purple Hearts*, a singer marries a soldier.

It wasn't just singular, interesting, complex women in 1930s films, either! There were films with dozens of them, or films entirely about friend groups seducing rich pianists, drinking, stealing fur coats, quoting their favorite books, and leaving their husbands-to-be at the altar to run off to Paris with their friends. (*The Greeks Had a Word For Them*, 1932. Watch it now.)

This isn't to say that there weren't boring, mediocre women in midcentury cinema; far from it. It also isn't to say that all women in modern cinema are boring and emotionless. Instead, I'm pointing out the vast gap between what made a "popular" film starring a woman in the 1930s and what makes a popular film now.

In fact, I'd argue that, in a lot of ways, the diversity of film hasn't changed much since the pre-code era, either. In Morocco from 1930, Marlene Dietrich wore a suit and kissed a woman. In 1935's *Sylvia Scarlett*, Katharine Hepburn explores gender fluidity and cross-dressing. In *Blondie Johnson*, Japanese actress Toshia Mori gets to be a badass fur-coat-wearing character without a single stereotype mentioned. 1938's *You and Me* is a casually anticapitalist German expressionist musical: "You can't get something for nothing." 1933's *Design for Living* features a bisexual ménage à trois. In 1934's *Imitation of Life*, African-American actress Fredi Washington plays a complex, sometimes cruel character who passes as white and struggles with her racial

identity. There were still many stereotypes in place, and still awful treatment portrayed on film. But the cultural script has made you forget that women onscreen experienced profound reckonings with race, queer identity, gender, polyamory, and misogyny. Because now, Hollywood mostly wants to sell you the same script over and over again: mostly white characters, a few diversity-only hires, and nowhere near the same tenacity and honesty that pre-code Hollywood possessed. Remember the boundaries that were in place in the 1930s, but don't forget that in many ways, they knew and were comfortable with so much more complexity onscreen than we are now. I'm a pre-code bitch. I also happened to write the book on it.

Women didn't stop climbing social ladders, running businesses, standing up for themselves, enduring abuse, or navigating motherhood. We just stopped being as honest about it in mainstream cinema. Instead, we have a blockbuster film for women once or twice a year (*Barbie, Little Women, Wicked, Freakier Friday*) that we all get to love and freak out about. For the rest of the year, the movie theaters are full of *Spiderman-Dogman-Top Gun-Fast and Furious* variations, sequels, and big-budget films. We simply aren't making as many movies; it's true. But we've also stopped caring about a woman being able to walk into a cinema and see herself. And that matters a lot more than you think.

In 1939, MGM gathered its most talented female stars. They decided to make something quietly revolutionary: a film featuring only women onscreen, and largely women off-screen. Anita Loos, a famous author and screenwriter at the time, focused the narrative on jealousy, marriage, divorce, infidelity, and power struggles within female friendship. Oh, and it also featured a 10-minute color fashion sequence, unheard of at the time. I think about *The Women*, and despite the 2008 remake, I think to myself, "This would never happen today." Rarely would a big

studio like Amazon or Netflix decide to make an all-female film, written by women and largely created by women, about themes that resonate with us. They simply don't do this—on a large scale, big-budget level, very often at all. And we need to have a reckoning about that.

The women's picture, to me, died with the women's movement. Ironic, I know. But with the Second Wave, many women decided they didn't want to be targeted specifically as "women." Just people. This was great for court cases, having your own credit card, and being a single parent. But it wasn't so good for the film industry, in large part, which was run by men whose internal biases didn't change with the publication of *The Feminine Mystique*. They just decided that if women were people, they could make films about people, which meant mostly men. The Second Wave of feminism happened in capitalist America. Capitalist America has an inherent hierarchy, an inherent patriarchy. You can only be so free when women are still bought and sold, treated as "capital." So when a story about a ruthless, ambitious woman and her friends turned up in the script slush pile, it was rejected, while a story about male gangsters or Wall Street was picked up. The women's movement enabled Hollywood to deny the moral interiority of the female experience. Instead, they gave us *Bride Wars*.

I am not blaming the women's movement solely, or at all (they didn't intend to have this effect on film), but rather saying that it had a very minuscule effect on actual female representation in the film industry, likely because the cultural and political changes happening at the time did not infiltrate the beliefs and policies of male power in entertainment. Instead, it very often gave men the exact excuses they needed. It wasn't the sole reason for the lack of female representation, but it was an important one that should not be neglected.

There were still many films about complex women in the 1970s and '80s, but nowhere near the endless churning the 1930s had given us: the recognition after recognition that we were allowed to be complex, weird, and contradictory. "Chick Flicks" and teen films made a comeback in the '80s. In the 2000s, dozens of "female-centric" films were made. But they were usually about romance, not power structures. There's a time and a place for a rom-com—they serve a real purpose, as we'll get to in my romance novel/BookTok chapter. But they can't be the only, or even the primary part of women we focus on in film, because it's not representative of real life. It makes us feel that, if we are endlessly bombarded with this storyline, our lives should be a sugar-scrub-pink designer parade of attractive suitors, promotions, and catfights with friends. The traditional late 20th-century "chick flick" usually doesn't focus on internal worlds or the gritty, imperfect realities of being a woman. I love *Clueless*. But I can't expect to learn about abuse or mental illness from an internal perspective as I could with a classic film. There was simply a monumental change.

Dirty Dancing addressed illegal abortions: that was revolutionary. *Legally Blonde* showed a woman working her way up: that was also revolutionary. But women were addressing those topics in 1930s cinema with more honesty and audacity than anything I've seen since. Film reflects our reality. Never disregard the impact of the moving picture on moving societal expectations. They are intertwined just as music and politics are.

"All these relationships between women, I thought, rapidly recalling the splendid gallery of fictitious women, are too simple," Virginia Woolf wrote in 1929's *A Room of One's Own*. This quote served as the intellectual basis for the creation of the infamous Bechdel test.

"And I tried to remember any case in the course of my reading where two women are represented as friends. ... They are now and then mothers and daughters. But almost without exception, they are shown in their relation to men. It was strange to think that all the great women of fiction were, until Jane Austen's day, not only seen by the other sex, but seen only in relation to the other sex. And how small a part of a woman's life is that." In her essay, Woolf painted a picture of female representation that showed how portrayals of women in the media at the time were not only patriarchal but also statistically inaccurate. Statistically, women spend the vast majority of their social lives with women over their lifetimes. Whether it's on the kindergarten playground or in the old folks' home, we often enjoy female company far more than male.

In 1983, nearly 50 years after Woolf's essay, cartoonist Alison Bechdel started her weekly comic strip Dykes to Watch Out For. This comic strip was among the earliest ongoing depictions of lesbians in popular media. The strip detailed characters' lives, loves, careers, and politics over many years: often diverse, often lesbian. In 1985, she drew two of her characters in a conversation about filmgoing. The strip is titled "The Rule."

"I only go to a movie if it satisfies three basic requirements," her character says as she walks through a movie theater with a friend beside her. "One, it has to have at least two women in it. Two, they have to talk to each other. Three, about something besides a man." They go home once zero films fit their requirements. Women in movies are rarely seen outside of their obligations and relationships with men. The Bechdel test abolishes that standard, stating that for women, especially queer women, seeing women having relationships onscreen outside of the context of men is not just freeing but incredibly necessary. "[The Bechdel Test] articulates something often missing in popular

culture: not the number of women we see on screen, but the depth of their stories, and the range of their concerns," Neda Ulaby wrote. The test moved into feminist film criticism in the 2010s, where it became the gold standard for judging television, film, books, and other forms of popular media. If passing the Bechdel Test were mandatory, it would've taken around half of the films considered for the Oscars in 2025 out of the equation: *Nickel Boys*, *A Complete Unknown*, *The Brutalist*, and *Conclave*, with others passing "dubiously." That's not to say that there aren't incredible movies that don't pass the test. It's to say that there are still an astounding number of films where women do not even talk, and the entire context of the movie centers around men. "If you change the third rule of the test to: 'About something besides men or marriage or babies,' you can strike out about 50% of the small proportion of mass-entertainment movies that do otherwise seem to pass the test," writer Charles Stross noted. "Does reality itself pass the test? How much of the time? Can we 'blame' films/TV for that?

What is so frightening about women talking to each other without the mediation of their supposed interest in men/marriage/babies?" Nina Power asks in her landmark feminist book *One-Dimensional Woman*. This raises my question: does media representation have to reflect life, or does it have to reflect information and complex human experiences? If we want culture and humanity to move forward, we must portray the people and issues we want to discuss in the mass media. That's not *Superman*, it's not *Gladiator II*, and it's not *Fast and Furious*. That's films about people and situations that aren't usually discussed, underrepresented struggles. Film is a way of humanizing people—why wouldn't we humanize the people who need it most? Film need not be a mirror, but a magnifying glass. The Bechdel Test is that magnifier.

In the 1920s, less than 20% of films passed the Bechdel test. By the 1930s, that number had increased radically. Around fifty percent of films passed the test during that decade, according to DataWrapper. The next three decades maintained a similar number, hovering around forty to fifty percent of films passing. What's surprising is that there was no increase in Bechdel-approved films in the 1970s during the women's movement. Portrayals of specific women might have changed, but the number of women in films talking to each other about their lives did not increase. There was only a fourteen percent increase in the number of films that passed from the 1930s to the 2010s. Noticeable, but still, the biggest increase in Bechdel-passing films happened from the transition from the 1920s to the 1930s, with pre-code Hollywood, sound films, and a plethora of complex female heroines.

This data is telling and certainly fascinating, but which films actually pass the Bechdel test? In the 1930s, pretty much every film audiences saw was a studio production. Today, we have much more diverse sources: low-budget and indie films, as well as international productions. The internet has enabled indie filmmakers and foreign films to reach a real audience. The studio is no longer the only filmmaking that matters. The Bechdel test does not measure the cultural effect of films, their popularity, or their longevity. As a film historian, I know that women's pictures in the 1930s- 1940s were huge every single month, year after year, and brought in the big bucks. Among the 89 films that won the Academy Award for Best Picture, forty-four (forty-nine percent) met the Bechdel test criteria, according to a 2018 BBC analysis. The study found that a higher percentage of Best Picture winners passed in the 1930s than in 2018.

Additionally, there were more female directors in the 1910s than there are today, a statistic I share quite a bit. While there

is a widely accepted belief that female representation in modern film is strong, these two statistics show that the backward (in heels) trend is far starker than imagined. Female voices are needed more than ever.

Women's movies now are rare, and when they do break out, it's major. Women were the mainstays, the players, the selling point of the films back then. Today, the selling points are franchise deals and intellectual property. In movies today, we have stopped selling people and started selling brands. And so, with the women's movement enabling executives to stop calling these films "women's pictures" and the overall franchising of Hollywood, women stopped being the selling point.

That's not to say that Gen Z doesn't have strong women onscreen. Just as women in classic cinema can teach us about society, the women's pictures we do have tell us exactly who we are—and what women we want to represent us.

Classic women's pictures center on exorbitant, vibrant girlhood—tapping together glistening red shoes, waltzing around studio backlots in pink light, yellow raincoats, pastel umbrellas. The inspiration for Greta Gerwig's Barbie started with classic Technicolor musicals: *The Red Shoes, Umbrellas of Cherbourg, The Wizard of Oz, Singin' in the Rain*, and *An American In Paris*. "I just don't feel like I've seen very many movies about 17-year-old girls where the question is not, 'Will she find the right guy' or 'Will he find her?'" Greta Gerwig told *Rolling Stone* during her publicity tour for her first film, Lady Bird. "The question should be, 'Is she going to occupy her personhood?' Because I think we're very unused to seeing female characters, particularly young female characters, as people." This is the central question that divides modern filmmaking from classics: while classic Hollywood, especially pre-codes, did

center romantic plots, more often than not, personhood was central. How does the woman change and relate to her world? How does the world crush the woman? Film is existential, and therefore deserves to cover existential questions. This is why Gerwig drew much inspiration from the classics when she took on the Barbie project. The classic girlhood movies are about more than one struggle. Gerwig, who started in Hollywood as an actor, was essentially handed the Barbie project with full creative freedom after her previous critical successes (*Lady Bird* and *Little Women*). Although she partnered with Mattel, which owns the rights to Barbie, Gerwig was adamant about exploring the film's central contradiction: how can a doll be feminist?

Greta Gerwig was skeptical of Barbie while writing the film's script. If Barbie dolls were real humans, they wouldn't be able to keep their heads up. Their proportions would weigh them down, and they would have to crawl on their hands and knees. "Barbie would have a BMI of 16.24 and fit the weight criteria for anorexia. She would not menstruate," Galia Slayen wrote for a *HuffPost* article titled "The Scary Reality of a Real-Life Barbie Doll." Slumber Party Barbie, introduced in 1965, came with a set of accessories, including a scale permanently set to 110 pounds and a book titled *How to Lose Weight*, with a simple instruction printed inside: "Don't eat."

Barbie has been the female American symbol for decades, and yet the Barbie brand wants us to starve ourselves, wreck our hormonal and reproductive health, and ultimately die. Femininity for girls is a hunk of plastic with a two-inch waist. Femininity isn't Joan of Arc; it isn't resilience; it isn't strength, vigor, or the capacity for life. No, femininity is the capacity for death. Femininity is Cathy from *Wuthering Heights*, another woman's picture for our time, cinematically dying to orchestral music on an ornate bed. Femininity is the tragedy leaving the

theater, the look of death in a woman's eyes. Femininity is Ellen West; femininity is a feeling of liberation that becomes a piece of trash floating in a dump on the Pacific Ocean.

"If you're walking around, congratulations! You don't look like Barbie," Gerwig told the *New York Times*. So—how was Gerwig supposed to make a film celebrating womanhood that was built on billions of dollars made from teaching girls they weren't good enough?

Gerwig's childhood dolls were hand-me-downs. Her mother, steeped in dialogue from the women's movement, believed that Barbie reinforced broken stereotypes about womanhood. Still, Gerwig played with hand-me-down Barbies as a child. As she said it, she was "doing the thing and subverting the thing" from the beginning, just as the Barbie brand always has. Barbie went to the moon before Neil Armstrong. Barbie owned her dream house before women could have credit cards. And yet, as Gloria Steinem once said, she perpetuated "everything the women's movement was trying to escape from." Barbie was burned by second-wave feminists with the bras, thought of as representing everything the male gaze wanted. Yet girls still play with her today. She's exactly as complex as womanhood should be. Horrible yet empowering, stark but inescapable. "People say, 'Well, what's the story of Barbie?'" Gerwig said. "The story of Barbie is the fight that's been going on about Barbie." Case in point, the paradox is why this film exists.

When Gerwig was tasked with taking on this dichotomy of Barbie, she'd examined since childhood, Mattel's executives said one thing: "Do whatever you want." She created an authentically artificial world, filled with philosophy and theory, Indigo Girls and Chanel shoes. Meaningful and meaningless, stuffed with color, beaches, and classic film influence. It would become

the defining "women's picture" of this era. And just like the doll herself, the point was less the film and more the discussions it enabled. When Barbie was released, I was at summer camp in the woods. I asked if anyone wanted to go to town and see the film. Every woman I asked was equally curious about seeing the portrayal, wondering how a renowned female filmmaker would approach the blonde plastic stick without making it a children's show or a cultural autopsy.

When we all finally went to see the film, the most memorable moment was what many call "the monologue." America Ferrera speaks to Barbie about the impossibility of being a woman. "You have to be thin, but not too thin. And you can never say you want to be thin. You have to say you want to be healthy, but also you have to be thin. You have to have money, but you can't ask for money because that's crass. You have to be a boss, but you can't be mean," Ferrera monologues to a room of Barbies. "I'm just so tired of watching myself and every single other woman tie herself into knots so that people will like us. And if all of that is also true for a doll just representing women, then I don't even know." The real plastic Barbie cannot speak for herself. But if she could truly have feelings, standards of beauty would also oppress her. Nobody wins. We are only seen in different extremes of "losing."

In 1994, clinical psychologist Mary Pipher released *Reviving Ophelia*—a book that takes angsty teen girlhood as a series of case studies, as a state created by a "girl-poisoning culture." The book is essentially about how girls growing up in American culture often lose themselves during adolescence. Our self-esteem, self-worth, and the true substance of who we are. Pipher argued that every expectation placed on a girl, whether regarding appearance, consumerism, class, or compliance, cul-

minates in the loss of the true self, the creation of a false self, and an approval-seeking mindset. In the early '90s, the teenage mental health crisis had been neglected, especially for girls. No one had ever identified that our culture poisons girls, because that would've been too stark. But the truth is, the landscape of mental illness for girls and women has been stark since the beginning of the patriarchy. People were just too blind to acknowledge it. It was essentially a psychological awakening for many parents and practitioners, but not necessarily a full cultural awakening. The girl-poisoning tabloids of the 2000s didn't seem to take a page from Pipher's book, but Gerwig did. Gerwig's inspiration for Barbie began with *Reviving Ophelia*.

"Simone de Beauvoir believed adolescence is when girls realize that men have the power and that their only power comes from consenting to become submissive adored objects. They do not suffer from the penis envy Freud postulated, but from power envy," Pipher wrote. This desire for power, to have control over our world, is what Gerwig built with Barbie. Barbie Land is a matriarchal society where Barbies hold all positions of power and exist in a self-sufficient, female-centered society. A power-swapped world, essentially. The world that would alleviate much of the current pain and barriers surrounding adolescent girlhood. The world that Pipher's book is named after, Ophelia from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, does not drown beautifully in a world of crushing expectations, but is instead revived or even prevented from drowning in the first place.

When Barbie enters the "Real World" with roller skates on her newly flat feet, she quickly becomes depressed by the rules she is expected to follow and the judgment she is subjected to. When teen girls discover the real world, we all experience a kind of disillusionment. We become the versions of ourselves society tells us we should be, or we "act out" in numerous ways:

through self-harm, relationships, anger, etc. Barbie experiences a painful loss of identity when she enters a patriarchal society. A realization that she isn't as special as she used to think, that she is now "just a woman" in a society that wants to crush her with unwanted touching, staring, loss of purpose, and insecurity. Both Reviving Ophelia and Barbie sign off with a similar message: embracing the true self. But what does the true self even mean when you're a doll? How are we expected to find such wisdom when it has been coerced out of us?

The answer lies in one of Barbie's most famous scenes, in which the titular character sits next to an older woman at a bus stop. They look at one another for a moment. "You're beautiful," Barbie says. "I know it," the woman says. Barbie cries. Our true selves are not in some deep, solo-searching journey, but in how we relate to one another and how we reinforce the stories we are told. These kinds of stories, which pull us into the "real self," can only be told when a woman is behind a camera, when the stories aren't about our beauty but about imperfection and resilience despite it, when the stories make us feel as if there's nothing we cannot do, good or bad. We take power back by creating the women we need to see by honoring every single one of us. However, that's more complicated than it might seem at times.

Barbie received eight Oscar nominations in 2024. Instead of focusing on the unprecedented attention a female-led and focused film had garnered, many honed in on the "snubs" by the Academy: they had not nominated Margot Robbie or Greta Gerwig in their respective categories. They deserved recognition for a complex portrayal of womanhood and a cultural phenomenon that defined the year. But there's a particular nuance to focusing too much on awards and too little on substance.

There are so many fundamental human rights being taken

away from women around the world. Pop culture is important for women, but in the grand scheme of women's issues, being upset over an Oscar nomination is a drop in the bucket. If Barbie were really a fully feminist movie, one for all women, the profits would have been donated to reproductive rights around the world, to helping single mothers, to feeding girls, and helping them get educated. Americans and the Western world at large are so privileged that some of us seem to think our biggest problem is that our female pop stars are criticized and that sometimes women don't get nominated for Oscars. I like to take a wide approach to these issues. You can't neglect Barbie and its profound impact on women or pop stardom. But you can connect these phenomena to bigger issues: Olivia Rodrigo, Doechii, and Chappell Roan represent our society's approach to queer artistry and pride, reproductive rights, and racism.

Barbie represents feminism under capitalism and how an American, capitalist, white-centric film can never fully understand the broad female experience or what intersectional feminism actually means. Barbie calls itself intersectional because it features a diverse cast of women, but it still focuses on the American experience. Not the experiences of immigrants, people of color, and low-income communities. I realize the limits of a single film. Barbie did something incredible: it was a movie that unified millions of women and taught them that their struggles and loves are valid. But it still functions within a broken system that serves to sell out the box office and partner with brands rather than make women's lives. Barbie partnered with over 100 brands, from Airbnb to Crocs to Burger King.

Meanwhile, one in ten women live in extreme poverty, and 1 in 4 women experience physical violence in a lifetime. There's something that seems so morally wrong to me about commercializing feminism—making money off "feminism" while most

women suffer profoundly every day from our broken system. If you're profiting off feminism, it's probably not feminism. You can't call it intersectional when you're hoarding wealth and making money for huge corporations. At the same time, Barbie broke boundaries for women in film and sparked essential conversations. The profound impact was both on a corporation's profits *and* on the way we talk about patriarchy. I think the takeaway here is that there's no way to make a truly feminist movie in the world we currently live in. Capitalism inhibits true intersectionality, but the conversation is still worth having.

A lot of the films mainstream Gen Z culture turns to might seem random. A movie about a doll, a psychological Irish horror, a 2000s throwback: they all have one through-line: safe escapism. We turn to smut Wuthering Heights and empowered Barbie because nothing's left. We want comfort and proof that men don't want to hurt us, that we can be powerful, like the 1930s movies—except still not as morally complex. Even though moral complexity and "interesting" roles for women are really needed, it says something about our time that we care more about feeling safe than feeling challenged. Film consumption comes from a place of desperation these days. For heterosexual women, the male "heartthrobs" onscreen these days are always emotionally intelligent for a reason. Paul Mescal plays men who cry, and Jacob Elordi feels "at home" playing vulnerable characters. And there's Timothée Chalamet, who isn't the typical muscular, tanned heartthrob but brings emotional depth and understanding to every role. Everything in women's culture right now is either an escape from our desperation or a vehicle for our rage. We want to know that the world won't kill us—or that we can escape from that reality for a few hours.

That's why the feminist film of this decade is about a doll,

not poverty or billionaire pedophile circles. Because at the core, women now are so hunted that we want the pink, we want the simplicity, the doll come to life. We're living in a contradiction, so we make our art a contradiction. We make what's popular impossible to understand. Embracing consumerism and critiquing it, reclaiming a doll and criticizing it. This core contradiction is what girlhood is today. We reclaim and reduce, and we reuse the past, and hate it simultaneously. Barbie was hypocritical. Hypocrisy is girlhood.

All popular Gen Z girl movies are contradictory.

The Substance, a body horror film from 2023, condemns the impossibility of modern beauty standards and then subjects its audience to brutal, violent scenes about the female body and the aging process. Nothing's pretty, and not much makes sense either. We liked it because it felt real—Barbie with bloodshed. Beauty standards harm us in that nearly-invisible way. If you don't notice the anorexic girl who isn't in class any longer, if you don't notice the way you subject yourself to the standards of impossible perfection, you might miss it. And yet, this beauty ideal has become so pervasive for us that when we do notice it, it feels like death.

My Old Ass, an existentialist shroom-trip comedy, does the same. The film follows Elliott as she corresponds with her older self (whom she met while tripping on shrooms) and warns her about the future. "Enjoy salmon before it's gone!" Aubrey Plaza says on the phone. Once a secret about a future tragedy in her life comes out, Elliott has to decide to live anyway. To subject herself to the horror that will become her life, even if it isn't worth it in the future. The movies Gen Z gravitates towards are often existential or completely frivolous. We want ice skating romances or Albert Camus. We want *Euphoria*, or we want 2000s rom-coms. We think in black and white, and the few

"women's pictures" of today acknowledge that as well. That, in the Substance, Margaret Qualley is a pop star in a pink leotard who also happens to have been ripped from a gaping, bloody hole in Demi Moore's back. Absurdism is our cinema.

And it's important to note that these films were all directed by women. Greta Gerwig, Megan Park, Coralie Fargeat. The real way to bring female interiority back into the pictures is to put women behind the camera. Female directors bring rage, satire, complexity, and hope. The full kaleidoscope. Just like they always have, starting with Alice Guy-Blaché, a director-producer who started in the film industry in 1896, when it was barely an industry. Then came Lois Weber, who made films about drugs, abortion, sexual politics, and eugenics. *What Do Men Want?* was the title of her 1921 film about an unwed mother and a suicide. It's not fully modern, as no films from the 1920s are—one title card describes a woman as "fascinatingly gay"—but Weber and all early female directors are the answer to the women's picture and cinema at large right now. We want crazy. Safety was never cinema's goal. Audiences wanted subversion, exploration, and a look into real lives. Let women be real again. Let's take our doll costumes off and become as complex and wild as we really are. Let's reclaim cinema as something more than a passing escape. Let's make women debate in audiences, divide critics, and teach people about female struggles beyond Oscar nominations. Bring back the women's picture.

Chapter 3: Cottagecore
or: Why We Bake and Use Flip Phones During the Political Apocalypse

❦

> "The regular hiatus between what we fancy we know and what we really know, practical assent and simulated ignorance which allows us to live with ideas which, if we truly put them to the test, ought to upset our whole life. So long as the mind keeps silent in the motionless world of its hopes, everything is reflected and arranged in the unity of its nostalgia."
>
> —Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

In this near-apocalyptic haze of orange skies and yellow journalism, everyone wants to escape. Escape fantasies are the best sign of a culture in decline. Fantasizing about ways our lives could differ signifies a fear of the present. The term "escape fantasy" conjures a whole world of images for me, most of which involve running. Running away from our lives, metaphorically and physically—as far as we possibly can.

Historically, this psychological idea has been repeated again and again. But it's manifested very differently, from the tomb of

King Tut to the dazzling silver movie screens during America's worst economic crisis. Most recently, we see the impulse to flee with the popularity of several trends, including cottagecore, retro fashion styles, and the rejection of social media and internet technologies.

When things get hard for everyone (especially women and girls), we turn to some seemingly random things to distract us. Most recently, that's Cottagecore, which has gained a huge following among Gen Z.

During the pandemic, I was, like all of us, alone and rotting. I joined Instagram at age ten (admittedly way too young) and got sucked into an entire world of pop culture, movies, and television. During that time, I noticed several female creators with interesting style and content that I couldn't quite place my finger on at the time, later dubbed "cottage-core." I don't think the movement was even named yet. Still, if I had to describe it to someone, I'd tell you to imagine Emily Dickinson in an idyllic Midwestern field, having a picnic on a gingham blanket with homemade sourdough bread and foraged mushrooms.

Streams bubble near the edge of the woods, a brick cottage nestles in between the trees, and a woman traipses down the hill to pick wild berries. This was an idea that appealed to many women at the time and still does: the idea that we don't need anything but ourselves to live. We can bake our bread, live in the forest, and read Jane Austen to our heart's content, with nobody judging us or telling us we're doing it wrong.

Romanticizing life became a trend, and while it had negative and positive aspects, it was firmly rooted in the culture of our time, a dizzying blur of pessimism, expectations, and problems. "What's the harm in pretending you're the main character in the movie of your life?" The University of Portland's Kalena O'Connell wrote. Romanticizing life became the "ultimate sur-

vival tactic." According to TikTok, putting everything you have in your pantry on a plate for dinner is romantic ("girl dinner"). So is going on a walk, reading a book, and making coffee. If the little things can give you joy, the Internet argues, why not indulge in them and get the most out of them?

Cottagecore was based on rural European life, and according to many, derived from the social media site Tumblr in 2018—but its origins stretch back much further.

"Ancient Greece had an enduring fascination with the region of Arcadia, located in the Peloponnesus, which many ancient Greeks first dismissed as a primitive place," Angelica Frey wrote for JSTOR. Arcadia became a nostalgic idea in the zeitgeist, representing a bucolic (and unattainable) lifestyle amid the filthy, disease-ridden Alexandria. "Its citizens developed what we can now call nostalgia for simpler times. They turned to Arcadia, which came to represent both an untainted yet benign countryside and the spiritual haven of a simple life," said Frey.

The Arcadia/Alexandria dynamic is not dissimilar to the modern manifestation of cottagecore. "The city, being located along the Nile River, was an important trading location, with easy transport of goods from middle and upper Egypt," Mason Waller wrote in *The History, Drivers, and Social Issues of the Cottagecore Movement*. "Like modern urban centers, the high volume of trade present in the area allows for cheap and easily accessible goods. However, these circumstances also lead to a distancing from the production of said goods. This exact theme is evident in Cottagecore today. With the advent of modern farming, shopping, and shipping, people have become increasingly removed from the production of everyday food and goods. Without a direct understanding of the processes required to produce goods, the creation and use of them in Cottagecore imagery romanticizes the process."

Hundreds of years ago, the lifestyle we now call "cottage core" was called "pastoral," a word usually used to refer to a farm or piece of land used for grazing cattle and sheep. It eventually became a word to describe an idealized life in the countryside. Cottagecore has deep roots in the rolling hills of England, from the plays of Shakespeare (*As You Like It* and *A Winter's Tale* have been cited as "pastoral fantasies") to the poetry of Wordsworth and Christopher Marlowe. There's also something to say about Walden Pond, imparting the pastoral, self-sufficient lifestyles of the time (even if Thoreau's mother did his laundry).

However, you may notice that throughout the history of cottagecore, there has been no significant gender role associated with it. Mostly white men contributed to the romantic reverie of pastoral life portrayed in the Middle Ages and beyond. Nowadays, however, cottage-core is directly tied to feminine roles in society.

"In a lot of ways, cottagecore exists in a binary stereotype of traditional, domestic bliss. Most often associated with women (i.e., housewives)," Mackenzie Vanacore wrote for HerCampus. "For queer folk, a cottagecore lifestyle is a safe space to exist without the pressures of society, including living a heteronormative lifestyle. Cottagecore embodies what has been traditionally viewed as feminine. Long flowing dresses, flowers, teacups, and books are all associated with femininity. And society has deemed these as 'lesser' and frowned upon compared to what is known as masculine."

Cottagecore has found its place in the queer community largely because, as Vanacore writes, "Cottagecore offers a sort of domestic bliss without the traditional gender binary." Many queer trans people have found a way to be expressive and comfortable with their femininity by way of this lifestyle. It makes so much sense for Cottagecore to find its footing with the queer

community because historically, many queer people have felt they had to run away from their lives to feel accepted. With homophobia and transphobia rampant in many communities, leaning into this self-sufficient and calming lifestyle feels safe for many.

It's impossible to ignore the lack of diversity in cottagecore and most internet aesthetics. The fantasy being romanticized is overwhelmingly European: bonnet-clad white women living alone in the English countryside. Black and Brown women have rich traditions of farming, baking, and self-sufficiency that go largely unaddressed in this white-dominant space. This absence reveals whose nostalgia gets marketed and whose history gets erased. There's something very white about romanticizing past eras at all—or even having the prospect of living in the past without back-breaking physical labor, abuse, and ubiquitous white supremacy. This reminds me of Taylor Swift's controversial lyric from The Tortured Poets Department: My friends used to play a game where/We would pick a decade/We wished we could live in instead of this/I'd say the 1830s but without all the racists and getting married off for the highest bid. I like to call this the nostalgia tax. The price we pay, in a past-oriented and past-romanticizing society, is that we can't have the fashion, aesthetic, and media of the past without the values that come with it. 2000s fashion in style? 2000s diet culture comes back, too. Is the Roman Empire in style? The patriarchy comes back, too. You think the 1950s are chic? So do tradwives. So much of our modern culture is built on the past, on reminiscing. That both helps and harms us. That lyric shows how we think we can strip a society's values for its aesthetics, which is plainly impossible most of the time. There's no 1830s without the racists; there's no Jane Austen without the patriarchy. Playing her "game," for many women, because there's no decade when they'd be safer than they

are now. Even nostalgia is privilege.

Because the pandemic was a time of increased stress and panic, people began to long for "simpler times," one of the most basic of human emotions. Sure, we know that no time was really "simple." After all, the Victorian era that Cottagecore is based on was very problematic by today's standards—but that doesn't stop us from wanting something easier. And maybe, in some way, it was. To me, it's unquestionable that life was at least a little easier before cell phones and computers, which have significantly complicated our lives. Social media bolstered new facets of expectations, the internet fostered new realms of disconnection, and online discourse platforms like Reddit created more disinformation than ever before. In some sense, cottagecore is all about escaping this paradigm.

Most of the activities glamorized with this lifestyle are what therapists call "self-soothing," so there's no question why it arose so prominently during 2020. Activities like journaling, foraging, hiking, picnicking, and baking have been shown to reduce stress, which may have been why so many people were drawn to "bucolic lifestyles" during the pandemic.

For me, baking is as much an escape as it is a coping mechanism. It's a great escape to indulge in the physical act of baking, doing something in the real world that has immediate (and delicious) benefits. I often get so stuck in my head, but baking brings me back to this moment, right now. Oddly, baking chocolate chip cookies can have a very therapeutic effect.

For people with a lot of time (and some money), sourdough bread became a phenomenon during COVID. Maybe because we are subconsciously drawn to what calms us down. Baking, to me, has always felt like magic. For a lot of people, there's something about it that soothes. Perhaps the idea that you can follow

a list of simple steps and ingredients and get something delicious without overthinking or worrying is comforting.

For Gen Z, baking has become popular for many reasons. Social media has popularized "aesthetic baking," which includes more intricate designs, health-conscious ingredients, and creative flavor profiles not found in previous decades (matcha brownies, anyone?). For my generation, and especially for girls, baking is a communal and collaborative activity—and the same goes for cottage-core participants.

With women and baking comes a long history of conformative femininity—and many don't realize how deeply ingrained it is in our gender roles, even today. Not long ago, much of women's work was forced, unpaid household labor, including preparing food for their children and husbands. Delicately icing cakes with buttercream and assembling pie crust in a dish became "woman's work," juxtaposing a woman's job of caring and nurturing, and furthering the image of women as symbols of perfection. The delicate precision that goes into the activity mirrors the attitudes women were supposed to have towards other aspects of life: motherhood, beauty, and fashion. Food preparation became and continues to be the image of femininity, immortalized by the prim and proper housewife prepping dinner in a glistening kitchen.

"For a long time, women didn't have a choice over whether or not to bake - for middle classes at least, homemaking was women's main role, and families needed feeding. An oven was a privilege, even, and a mouthful of homemade cake was all it took to size up a woman's moral integrity, not to mention her suitability as wife and mother," food writer Anna Harri writes.

"When faced with so many of my contemporaries wondering how I can bake AND study feminist politics, I began to

understand that baking is always and inescapably a political act for women, just like everything else we do, wear, or say. [Male bakers] can bake and maintain their individuality. In contrast, the personalities and achievements of women bakers are reduced to their looks or to their shade of lipstick, which, in turn, helps society position them somewhere along the feminist spectrum."

It's interesting to me how, on the British Baking Show, Paul Hollywood, the primary male judge, maintains his "full masculinity" and respectability in a historically female profession without question. In contrast, women entering primarily male professions (construction, garbage collection, engineering) are often questioned. According to Harri, "political assumptions" and "simplistic stereotypes" are often made when women decide to bake. But then again, this happens for some men in the kitchen too; they are often labeled gay or "too feminine" when armed with a mixer and covered in flour. These criticisms come from our culture of deeply rooted misogyny, from the image of the kitchen being a "woman's place." If there weren't widespread hatred of everything womanly, men in the kitchen wouldn't be "showing their feminine side" and would instead be engaging in another fun activity to sustain themselves. Baking comes with the expectation of pleasing others (specifically men), so when men inhabit that position, it is assumed they do so to please others rather than themselves.

So no, baking is not "gay," nor is it "feminine," as odd as it may be to say. Activities and tasks cannot be labeled as gendered; the same goes for barbecuing and butchering, which have long been men's hobbies and tasks. No matter how much our society may try to convince us that these jobs are divided and determined by gender, we have the freedom to express ourselves through food and art. This has never been truer than with feminist baker and author Becca-Rea Tucker, who has taken to baking as a medium

to share her political views and express her emotions (known online as @thesweetfeminist). Tucker emblazons her cakes with feminist and pro-choice messages, with one lime-green cake proudly reading "I don't regret my abortion."

She defiantly posts all kinds of pro-abortion content against a backdrop of baking, further proving that historically "female" tasks can now be imbued with feminism. When Tucker did a workshop at Grinnell College (of which she is an alumna), the women who attended adorned their cakes with other slogans such as "It is okay not to be okay" and "Just say gay." The resurgence of women baking, enjoying it (and putting their political views and values into the task) further signifies a reclamation of femininity, a regaining of something everyone, female or otherwise, should have access to: making and eating food.

Now that those years of forced domesticity have (mostly) passed, women, especially younger women, are reclaiming what it means to be feminine through baking. For many of us, baking is less about expectations and more about joy and self-sufficiency. Baking requires a special level of self-confidence and trust—ingredients that are seemingly useless on their own (sugar, flour, vanilla, yeast) can be added in small amounts to create a harmonious dish.

"A way to a man's heart is through his stomach," or so we are told. What is the difference between baking in the 1950s and baking in the 2020s? Often it's not for a man; it's for our enjoyment (and consumption).

With women's liberation comes the reclaiming of women's right to have an appetite and to enjoy food. Women don't have to diet or calorie-count to earn respectability, and this includes cooking and baking —something we can now do as a simple gift to ourselves, not an obligatory task for our families. "It is a requisite that people get nutrients by eating meals; it is not a

requisite that people have bagels or cookies or scones. In fact, nutritionally speaking, the stuff we bake is not good for us," Sophie Lucido Johnson wrote for the *Guardian* in a piece titled "Why Women Bake: The Healing Power of a Quiet Sisterhood." She continued: "Baking exists for pleasure only. It has no alternate agenda. More and more, it seems, women are baking not out of obligation, but for themselves."

So, if we are baking for ourselves and realize it is something women before us have done for centuries, is there anything wrong with that? In a way, it's another route that young women are "leaning in" to femininity in the modern era. "There's something intrinsically misogynistic about decrying a tradition because it has always been female," food writer and television cook Nigella Lawson wrote in her 2000 cookbook *How to Be a Domestic Goddess*. Lawson even called baking a "feminist act."

We should all want to see a world in which domestic duties such as home cooking and baking, doing laundry, and taking care of children are applauded as "hard work," not just as an assumed skill set for a mother. We should all want a world in which those tasks become equally important—rather than the never-ending double burden many women face, where only one of their jobs is recognized as such. "Female labor" isn't labor and isn't paid. This devaluing of the work that runs the world keeps most systems in place.

"Of course, women have always worked, that is to say, raised children, tended to the home, grown crops, etc., and how different the history of the world would have been had this been from the start been regarded as labor to be rewarded," Nina Power wrote in *One-Dimensional Woman*. "While one of the lasting achievements of feminism is to re-establish the link between household labor, reproductive labor, and paid labor, capitalism has to perpetually pretend that the world of politics has nothing

to do with the home. As Marx notes, it is only when women enter work 'outside the sphere of the domestic economy' that transformations in relations between the sexes, the composition of families, and so on, really start to happen." Cottagecore is reinhabiting that space, except this time it's a trend that matters instead of invisible, unacknowledged labor. It's 'relaxing' now. The reasons we're leaning into the domestic labor side are complex. Perhaps it's ancestral, perhaps it reminds us of our older female family members. Perhaps it's due to late-stage capitalism, where all labor feels invisible, despite it not being "female-coded" in our society. So instead of grueling jobs, we turn to the more "natural" way of working. The thing that doesn't feel as useless or as toiling, but feels rejuvenating after a small pop-culture break with the working women and girlbosses of the last 40 years. You can simply imagine it: you don't get up at 5 am to walk on a treadmill and answer corporate emails in a building you hate; you don't deal with unhappy customers insulting you. You wake up whenever it feels best to you, walk outside into the ivy, breathe, and mix flour with water and yeast. You watch it rise. You watch the smell of yeast and the bubbles and the hardwood walls of your cabin, brush the flour off your dress. There's an immediate benefit to all the work you do materially when you bake, when you read, when you ditch your phone, as I'll write about later in this chapter. Unlike "real jobs," cottagecore activities and escape fantasies in general have immediate material consequences. You're not tied to a globalized network or chain of higher-ups who control you. Everything is under your control.

Gerda Lerner's The Creation of Patriarchy, published in 1986, argues that female reproduction and giving birth are what brought us under patriarchal domination—the idea that our capacity for creating life threatened male superiority and therefore had to be kept under control with a rigid system. Many

feminist scholars have posited that in historical times, birth and the keeping of the home (including these now "cottagecore" coded activities) were powers that scared men. These scholars argue that women hold the key to creation; therefore, men feel a need to become superior and control these life-giving powers. In eras like today, where our reproductive rights are in limbo and constantly threatened, where our bodies are scrutinized and "optimized" (as you'll see in chapter 4), leaning into our ultimate historical power is a reclamation. The "girlboss" era was about working so hard that a woman becomes almost manly in her corporate power. It stripped us of our fundamental difference: the anatomy and truth of what we had historically been. What if our power didn't have to be simply corporate or simply reproductive? What if we were allowed to choose our destiny and reclaim our ownership of creation? Whether that's bread, babies, books, or corporations—they want us under control; they want us to be one thing. These feminine escape fantasies are proof that we don't have to be.

Reclaiming something traditionally feminine as valuable means recognizing femininity as something we should be proud of; something that warrants respect. So, in a way, Lawson is completely correct; baking is a feminist act.

This connects directly to another manifestation of domestic reclamation: the rise of the trad-wife movement (short for "traditional wife"). One of the genre's most popular creators, Estee Williams, describes traditional wives as "women, typically conservative Christians, who prefer to take a traditional or ultra-traditional role in marriage, including the belief that a woman's place is in the home." Williams posts many viral videos of what she does before her husband comes home, and she dresses in a full 1950s housewife wardrobe, akin to Betty Draper in Mad Men.

To understand the tradwife trend, it's important to understand what came before it. The #girlboss movement peaked in 2016, a politically controversial, feminist landslide of a year. The neologism was coined by Sophia Amoruso, the founder of the fast-fashion company Nasty Gal, when she used the title for her 2014 memoir.

Sheryl Sandberg's 2013 book *Lean In* argued that women could overcome workplace struggles by working harder and asserting themselves more clearly—a premise that Michelle Obama and others criticized for placing the burden on women rather than on the systems that oppress us.

"Lean In" inspired the #GirlBoss movement, which championed women's individual business successes despite its flaws. You can picture exactly what a girlboss looks like: '80s shoulder pads, dresses in navy blue, works at a PR firm, and vehemently believes in female empowerment. Girlboss vs. tradwife is the eternal conundrum for females. Given the push for women to be hardworking businesswomen not long ago, doesn't it make so much sense that now, some women would want to return to the home? Above it all, #girlboss and "Lean In" pushed for us to work even harder. Isn't it only natural that some women would want to "regress," given how tough that "rise and grind" lifestyle can be?

The irony of the TikTok tradwives is that they do, in fact, have a job—that of being an influencer—which, as many know, takes up tons of time and energy and can often make as much, if not more, money as a traditional job.

While many are posting their idealized lives, kneading sourdough and scrubbing floors for their husbands, others are responding to the movement with one question: if your husband makes all the money, where does that leave you?

Enitza Templeton, former Denver housewife and content

creator, was standing in a line to collect food stamps during a cold January after a ten-year marriage. She posted a TikTok clip that went massively viral in response to the tradwife movement. "Imagine this," she wrote over a clip of her staring somberly into the distance. "The tradwife life didn't work out. You have a ten-year gap in your resume, and four kids that need to be taken care of while he is off living with another woman, so now you're at the food stamps office trying to see when your application will be approved."

Her honesty stood in stark contrast to glamorized tradwife content and exposed the main problem with this lifestyle: you're giving up your life and financial security to another person for years. After all, in our sick society, money means freedom. A woman without money is not free.

The tradwife serves as another version of femininity offered to my generation. We have so many options, but, unsurprisingly, most of us aren't choosing this one. According to the Survey Center of American Life, 60% of Gen Z women call themselves feminists, a higher percentage than any generation before us. The Survey Center's Daniel A. Cox and Kelsey Eyre Hammond also noted that "Young women are leaving church in unprecedented numbers," because we "are more concerned about the unequal treatment of women in American society and are more suspicious of institutions that uphold traditional social arrangements."

More women are graduating from college than ever, and more women are in the workforce than ever. Just like the other topics discussed in this chapter, tradwives are another way women are trying to escape the sorrows of our modern lives. The tradwife serves as an homage to just how confusing it can be to be a woman these days: so confusing that we would choose to go back to the older, "better" ways instead of trying to fix our bro-

ken system.

Femininity becomes radical when it is chosen, not imposed. Whether baking a cake or becoming a tradwife, the choice itself is what matters—but we must be honest about the risks and realities of those choices.

This chapter is all about how young women, understandably, are turning to the past in a turbulent time. There's one medium that is always turning to the past and relies on it for constant inspiration… fashion. Trends and fashion move faster today than ever before because the 20-year trend cycle has been disrupted.

A recent example is the popularity of fashion styles from the early 2000s (tracksuits, low-rise jeans, miniskirts), but there are countless others. The platform shoe, popular in the '70s, became hugely popular again in the '90s. Big, bright colors from the '60s became popular in the '80s. There are several theories behind why this happens. People around age 20 are usually the ones setting fashion trends (whether on the runway, in magazines, or in Hollywood), and they often draw on "nostalgic" eras, including their childhoods. The other theory is that 20 years is the perfect amount of time for a trend to come back around; 10 years would be too soon (the young people consciously remember that time), and 30 years would be too late, and might be seen as kitschy or even "old." 20 years sits perfectly within that gap, and anyone would agree it's a long time, so it allows new trends to resurface or grow.

Lately, we've seen a disruption to this cycle, with "micro trends" repeating incredibly quickly. I bet you can guess the cause of this…TikTok! And other social media platforms. Social media allows trends to spread globally within hours, which means those trends can fade just as quickly. Anyone can now contribute to fashion and trendsetting on social media, allowing

many more voices to be heard and many more trends to develop. The biggest culprit, most likely, is fast fashion, which allows cheap goods (poorly and unfairly made in sweatshops) to travel around the globe in no time, reach your closet, and, before long, end up in the trash can. The explanation lies in the word "fast": these micro trends allow consumers to order an item at minimal cost, wear it, and move on to the next trend.

Something I (and many others) have observed as the antithesis to this trend is the modern popularity of thrift shopping. I grew up thrift shopping. It was always a normal thing to me, and I thought it was for other people, since I rarely bought new clothes. But it turns out that 87% of Americans buy their clothes new, a statistic I found fascinating. But my generation seems to be turning this around, with 83% of us saying we are willing to shop thrifted goods. This is most likely due to either the popularity of vintage styles or sustainability concerns, but I like to view it as another way we escape. Have you ever been among racks of bright colored shoes and crazy ball gowns and not felt completely enthralled and entertained? I haven't. It's a temporary rush akin to television or movies. There's something about secondhand that is incredibly appealing, namely both the price range and the creativity and variety of items.

Microtrends don't just apply to fashion; they also apply to memes, slang, and vocabulary. Blink twice, and you'll miss the "Roman Empire," the "little miss" memes, or the newest suggestive acronym. This is confusing as a young person because often half of my peers will miss a reference, or most of us will never have heard of something that is seemingly popular. But back to fashion: with the internet's accessibility, we're also better able to go back in time through the archives. Past trends are more available to us, which makes them more popular.

One example of this is Regency-core, which aestheticizes the

fashion and interior design of 19th-century Europe. Regency-core was influenced by the enduring popularity of English author Jane Austen, particularly her books Emma and Pride and Prejudice, and the Netflix TV show Bridgerton, which glamorizes the era. The rise of Regency-core styles is directly tied to Bridgerton, which came out at the perfect time for escapism. Women reached into the past for "simpler times," which somehow included the Regency era, when women were bound and tied up by corsets. It's somewhat ironic how, in a time of distress, we turned back to an era where women were so oppressed. Most eras of the past contain this, but especially this one.

Corsets also became incredibly popular again, as I see it ironically, because the piece of clothing that used to oppress women now serves as a vehicle for personal expression. Other items of clothing popular in 18th-century England were repopularized mid-pandemic due to Bridgerton, including opera gloves, feather accessories, and babydoll dresses.

Whatever opinion you have of Bridgerton, it undeniably serves as a next-level escapist fantasy.

Regency-core was piggybacked on one of the oldest fandoms of the modern era: Janeites, the obsessive, often female, often typecast fans of Jane Austen. "Janeites represent a critical plot point in the evolution of online sociology," Virginia Heffernan wrote for WIRED Magazine. "It's necessary to recognize Janeites as the avant-garde of digital culture. Not only are Janeites fans of literature by a woman and about women, but their organization was forced to become dexterous and ironic (not unlike Austen herself) in response to sexism and homophobia that kept members from taking the main stage at literary lectures."

But perhaps the most radical escape from modern pressures that I've encountered isn't about taking up a new, old-fashioned hobby—it's about completely rejecting the technologies that

caused these pressures in the first place.

As you read this (hopefully situated in a fluffy pink chair), you may realize something is absent from many of these Gen Z girl escape fantasies I've mentioned so far: technology. Whether it's cottage core, baking, tradwifery, or Jane Austen-isms, there are no cell phone notifications involved unless you're consuming the multitudes of online content about these non-online activities, of course (but as I say, there's always a level of irony to these things).

Part of this includes escape fantasies about eras before technology, specifically the 1990s and early 2000s. Generation Z is the "most nostalgic generation," according to GWI. 37% of us say we are nostalgic for the 90s, a time which most of us never lived through (or at least don't remember well). 40% of us long for an era we never lived through, and 70% of us regularly consume media from previous decades. It's safe to say that most of us wish we were born in another time, so we turn to escapist media like what we've been discussing in this chapter. Every generation romanticizes the "simpler times," an ideology that is never true (every era comes with its unique benefits and downsides). The idea of perfection existing in a realm beyond our access is at the core of the modern digital escape fantasy. This isn't new; it's just much more prevalent now—especially for girls and women.

The '90s are the new embodiment of imagined nostalgic perfection, something our parents, the teens at the time, never would have imagined. For them, the era was far from perfect; there were genocides, bombings, riots, and murders, just like any time in history (along with a familiar dose of teen angst). Technology has been a very clear-cut and influential change since that era, and it makes a lot of sense why teens now would turn back to the alternative, plaid-wearing, flip-phone-carrying kids of the 90s and early aughts as an homage to a simpler life

without the complications of technology.

At Edward Murrow High School in Brooklyn, New York, a similar movement was developing a few years ago. A club for high school students was formed by teenager Logan Lane when in-person school resumed. Like most of us, she had grown increasingly addicted to her phone during the pandemic, but unlike most of us, she decided to ditch it altogether and found it changed her life remarkably. "For the first time, she experienced life in the city as a teenager without an iPhone," Alex Vadukul wrote of Lane for the New York Times in 2022. "She borrowed novels from the library and read them alone in the park. She started admiring graffiti while riding the subway, then fell in with some teens who taught her how to spray-paint in a freight train yard in Queens. And she began waking up without an alarm clock at 7 a.m., no longer falling asleep to the glow of her phone at midnight." It sounds like a '90s coming-of-age movie to me, and perhaps subconsciously, my life is becoming increasingly screen-free because it feels so good.

Just like these other trends and movements, the Luddite Club is tech-free. Well…if flip phones don't count.

Logan longed to have no phone at all (the primal urge to throw my phone in a lake overwhelms me sometimes, too), but instead decided on a flip phone to assure her parents she was okay. She convinced friends and peers at her school to join her weekly club at Prospect Park, which she named after Ned Ludd, who is said to have broken two mechanized looms in a rage as an act of rebellion. He inspired others to do the same: the Luddites, a 19th-century movement of British textile workers, opposed new automated textile machinery due to concerns about workers' pay and the quality of output. Over time, the term has been adopted to reference people who are opposed to mechanization/new technologies, including the current oppo-

sition to cell phones.

Quickly, Luddite Clubs spread across the nation and, more recently, around the world. There are clubs in Colorado, Virginia, Pennsylvania, Seattle (unsurprisingly), Maryland, Washington, D.C., Florida, Brazil, and the list goes on. Logan Lane, who now studies Russian literature at Oberlin College, has turned the Luddite Club into a full-fledged non-profit organization. "We've even got a mission statement now," she told the New York Times in 2025. "We like to say we're a team of former screenagers connecting young people to the communities and knowledge to conquer big tech's addictive agendas," Lane also mentioned wanting to interview the mayor of Seine-Port, a town in France that has attempted to ban smartphones.

This is also a current trend in the wellness space: "digital detoxes" and "unplugging" have become increasingly popular and are filtering down into the mainstream. Some of us have developed a malaise for all things tech, and it's understandable, given the inescapable Muskish cyber-self-driving TikTok QR code madness which we experience in our everyday lives.

My best friend (a junior at Portland State University) regularly talks to me about how much she wants a flip phone. We read, cook, and go vintage shopping together (all free of phones, except for the occasional glamorous selfie photoshoot). What I am trying to say is that many youth are Luddites without even knowing it—and we're gravitating towards tech-free activities because they feel good, rather than being persuaded by trends or peer pressure.

"For the youth of today," Lane said in closing, "the developmental experience has been polluted; it's been cheapened. 'Who am I?' becomes 'How do I appear?'" Viewing ourselves from the outside diminishes our appreciation for emotional complexity and selflessness and, in many ways, inhibits true connec-

tion. Our solipsistic, narcissistic society promotes this attitude toward self-image, but that doesn't mean we can't rise above it. The Luddite Club is incredibly inspiring to me as a primary example of the activism and initiative my generation is willing to partake in, despite all the obstacles.

Returning to the old ways of femininity has its allure. Whether it's whipping up a cake, tossing out your phone, or reading Jane Austen, these trends (from vastly different eras) also reveal where our society lacks structure and support. Escape fantasies often have more to say about the escape than the fantasy. Why do we want to escape in the first place? This is more telling than the actual places and hobbies women retreat to, because ultimately, they're all the same. They offer a haven, a place where, above all, we feel accepted for our true identities, not bombarded by technologies, not invaded by expectations.

We're hiding from a society that demands perfection, leaving us performing roles we never chose. Our bodily autonomy is stripped away, and we're escaping the impossibility of being everything at once—both girlboss and tradwife, both effortlessly authentic and perpetually performing. Our newfound hobbies—flip phones, women's literature, baking sourdough—aren't hobbies at all. They're survival mechanisms. These are the spaces where we get to choose what femininity means on our own terms, where it's not stifled, misconstrued, or shaped into an object. The choice looks different for everyone, but for each of us, it's about reclaiming femininity—by our own definition and on our own time.

Chapter 4: Wellness Culture
or: $50 Fascism

❦

The "Pilates Princess" wears Lululemon leggings and a crop top, crisp white socks, and sneakers. She treats the LA sidewalks as her fashion show, displaying a $20 Erewhon smoothie with the same fervor one might tote a Chanel bag. She is perfect, in a 21st-century sense; elegantly, classically beautiful. She is real, and yet she is nowhere to be found.

It's April 2025, and I'm standing in a hip juicery in the Larchmont neighborhood of, Los Angeles, trying to order a smoothie with several ingredients I'm not sure how to properly pronounce: spirulina (that blue "superfood" powder derived from algae), acai (that Amazonian berry lauded for its antioxidant capacity), and reishi (that mushroom that allegedly prevents cancer).

Los Angeles has been confusing to me for some time, but never as much as it is in this moment. I feel like an alien in juice shops and smoothie places, fitness hotspots, and expensive grocery stores. There is so much of this world that I simply cannot understand.

"And would you like a protein boost with that?" the bored juicer asks from behind the counter. For some reason, I'm picturing beef or eggs being blended into my smoothie.

"We've got soy, whey, egg white, collagen…"

The irony of this is not lost on me: eggs (egg white) and beef

(collagen) are indeed being blended into smoothies. When I'm done ordering, I pay with my credit card, the only viable way to pay in Los Angeles these days, and I'm astounded that I just paid $20 for a smoothie, which is essentially indiscernible, antioxidant-packed sludge. Why am I mentioning this odd encounter? Smoothies are a day-to-day lifestyle choice of elite, young, wealthy, active LA women, also referred to online as the "Pink Pilates Princess." To analyze their effect on Gen Z women and fitness culture, I have decided to try a few of her favorite things myself.

On a sunny summer day, I walked into a local Pilates franchise building and was greeted by an unsmiling receptionist who asked me if I had grip socks. She then directed me to the wall beside her, where the socks were arranged into piles. "They're $17 each." I tried to hide my resentment over the absurd price for a pair of socks. *What would Pilates Princess do?* I thought to myself, and then politely nodded.

I had signed up for ClassPass, the app that gives you 2 weeks of workout classes at no cost, to try it out. A single class at this studio costs around $50 (a price I deemed insane for *a single* workout). I didn't know I would have to pay $17 for socks, so I escaped to the bathroom and changed into appropriate attire. All along the walls of the studio were neatly framed vague motivational phrases in bold print. "Half of being there is showing up," "Kickstart your fitness journey!" and "Push through the burn." Am I paying for the exercise, or the ethos? I thought. I remembered Joseph Pilates, the method's founder, and his enthusiastic statement that "In 10 sessions you will feel the difference, in 20 sessions you will see the difference, in 30 sessions you will HAVE AN ENTIRELY NEW BODY!!" Nothing about the exercise method's marketing framing had changed in the last 100 years. Same boundless excitement and promise: *we*

can get you abs, honey!

The bathroom had a shower, plus towels, shampoo, conditioner, and even some mini disposable toothbrushes. I instantly felt at ease, but I wasn't sure why. It's supposed to be an exercise studio, not a bougie house. Still, I spent all the time I could before class soaking up the amenities, like the fancy water-filtering machine with "coconut carbon." (They've got coconut in everything these days, don't they?)

I managed to slip into the class without the receptionist noticing me, and the instructor introduced herself. Surrounding me were thin women in leggings doing movements on exercise machines reminiscent of medieval torture devices. If you've never seen a reformer, it looks somewhat like a prop from a space-fantasy horror film. There are springs and boards that you're rearranging for each move, and you lie or sit on a platform and do some resistance work. And all the women in there are wearing these "chic" single-toned pastel clothes that were made by women around the world in sweatshops. "Wellness" is just their unpaid labor.

I was pretty lukewarm on the experience overall. The machine was confusing, and everyone around me seemed to know what to do. We did repetitive, low-impact movements, mostly centered around the core and legs. "Do you feel energized?" the instructor whisper-screamed into her Madonna mic. During the class, a woman who frequented the studio was cheered on for returning after a knee injury, and a postpartum mother was applauded for her strength. The atmosphere was interesting to witness because it felt very supportive, especially as an exclusively female space. Still, I could tell from the brand's advertising and social media that this wasn't as clear-cut as it appeared.

Every picture and video on the franchise's Instagram page featured a woman with the same body: lean, thin legs, visible abs,

and toned arms. The thinly veiled messages of "acceptance" and "growth" weren't lost on me: these kinds of fitness studios weren't marketing to women for spiritual growth. They were marketing them for a "hot body." They were capitalizing on insecurity and turning it into a multi-billion-dollar industry. An industry fed by the insatiable female desire to be wanted. Which, nowadays, is more prescient than ever.

And no, the class was definitely not worth $50.

Leaving the mirror-walled studio, I realized something.

For as long as I can remember, I've embodied my physical being outside myself. There are rarely moments when I can let go of appearance and just be. I feel so watched, so objectified, and depersonalized that I started to view myself as nothing more than a body. A body that either isn't good enough or gets me attention that I "asked for." The boundaries between the self and the body are so different. It's as if they don't connect the way they're supposed to. In a world obsessed with appearances and outer beauty, you start to see yourself that way. Viewing your body as if it's in a movie, being surveyed, filmed, judged. The male gaze becomes your own, without you even realizing it.

Women in the public eye feel a compulsive need to look perfect because other women they admire look perfect, and *they* also feel the need to look perfect. Then, because they have access to resources that perpetuate the myth, the perfect images just go on and on and on. (Of course, this is contingent on the idea that you can look "perfect" in society's eyes to begin with, which often starts with being straight-sized and white.) And these models, these celebrity women, also look upon other women with envy and feel the same hatred towards themselves. Because Jane Fonda had an eating disorder, they wanted to look like her, and then Princess Diana had an eating disorder, and they wanted to

look like her, too. From Bridget Bardot to Sabrina Carpenter to the next up-and-coming blonde pop star and beyond. Famous and wealthy women feed each other standards that they then perpetuate.

I felt so guilty for struggling with food and body image issues because, when I sit in an interview chair, I am, in some ways, standing in for the smart teen girl. When I do interviews about my Jewish identity, I'm asked about my stance on a war in a country I haven't even been to, expected to be the token Jewish girl. Every minority and every woman in the public eye has to be the mannequin for an entire demographic. For many women of color, their existence in the public eye is a "diversity token," devoid of personhood—a billboard of their race and gender rather than their ideas. Meanwhile, a man on television is just…a man.

"Do you really want them to think they have to look like you?" I've been asked. No! I don't! Should I wear a black hoodie and a mask like Banksy? It felt unfair that it was my fault for looking the way I do, for trying to look professional to be taken seriously, for putting on red lipstick and caring about those trivial things when girls my age are raped and can't get abortions. I think so many of us struggle to balance the trivial parts of everyday life as women with the darker, more lethal ones. Sometimes they feel like the same thing.

And yet I also felt jealous of all the Instagram blondes for looking impossibly tan and thin, because how could anyone real ever look that way? It's bad for women. Why do they look like that? I think to myself. And I realize, as I say this, that I have the incredible privilege of being able to fit into the box they want me to. I'm white and straight-sized. My face doesn't turn heads; my presence isn't a diversity chip. There are so many different sides to this equation. Some of us fit into the traditional mannequin,

and some of us are destroyed by it and by the biological impossibility of looking "societally appropriate."

It's impossible to navigate beauty standards as a young woman because you are expected to both uphold and defy them. If I showed up on TV wearing an undershirt, they would call it too revealing. If I showed up in plaid with no makeup, they would assume I was a lesbian and ask me why I don't wear mascara. If I try to uphold society's fucked-up standard of beauty, I'm a bad influence. "I'm so glad you didn't wear heels in your interview!" Wait, should I never wear heels again? Should I dress like a "prude"? What look do I need to have to be taken seriously? How could I be doing it wrong and right at the same time? And if I were struggling with this, how much do women of different backgrounds struggle with this as well? The women who didn't fit the standard society wanted? I want to smash the mannequin, stop existing only as my physical being, and have every woman's ideas be taken seriously on the grounds of ideas, not physicality. But we can't, so we sit up there on our billboards waiting to be seen as more than an image. To be seen as more than a checkbox, a minority, a "youth voice," or "the only woman we could get." And the Pilates Princess watches us, thinking she's fixed the problem by exercising and controlling, measuring, and aestheticizing everything in sight. She's built on a lie: if you're perfect, society won't have a problem with you. If you're perfect, maybe people will listen. Maybe people will care.

At the end of the day, the system attacks all of us at completely different volumes, and that's what is so insidious about it. "I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own," Audre Lorde wrote in 1981's The Uses of Anger. Each of us is in a different situation, but every one of us suffers in different ways. Even women everyone looks

up to as the pinnacle of patriarchal Pilates princesses still throw up in the toilet. Why haven't we just killed it all?

Beauty standards have stolen hours of my life and changed the fundamental feeling of being. That's the real problem. Women can't just be. We have to constantly strive for something more beautiful, and we never get there. That's not natural. Society has stolen our humanity from us, stripped us of being anything but pretty (or usually "ugly") faces. And we have a right to be fuming about that. The experiences our ancestors had, the hunter-gatherers who lifted boulders, never looked in a mirror once, and valued their bodies for strength and performance, not looks, were stripped away by Instagram and Playboy magazine within a few generations.

This is one of the reasons why Pilates is so popular. Women refining their bodies as if chipping away at a sculpture, trying to perfect it. The wording these fitness franchises use is vague for a reason. "Toned" doesn't have any meaning, and neither does "lean." If anything, those two things both mean thin. Being "in shape" isn't a specific action or state, and you can't measure it with a machine.

Furthermore, nobody even knows what counts as exercise these days: is walking a workout, or do you need strenuous strength training to receive the benefits of exercise? It's a purposefully confusing landscape because if OrangeTheory tells you you're improving your cardiovascular fitness, they want you to believe them. And if Bar Method tells you you're "toning" and "elongating" your thighs, you'll want to come back.

If you're a young woman on social media these days, you've been bombarded with this fitness trend whether you know it or not. The Pilates princess has arrived in the aestheticized black hole of social media with an Erewhon matcha latte in hand,

ready to teach us more about the links between feminism and exercise. Emily, let's call her our guide, is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to this discussion of modern women and fitness.

According to her Snapchat, Emily wakes up every day eager for the journey ahead. (She only feels that way after she drinks her $9 matcha and takes her ashwagandha and creatine supplements.) With an endless reserve of physical and mental energy, Emily is ready for her first energizing, rejuvenating Pilates class of the day, after which she will strut around Hollywood Hills showing off her tanned legs, which she swears aren't fake.

After that comes a trendy acai bowl, which she posts online and only eats a quarter of before she stops because she's "so full." For the rest of her day, she will buy various Lululemon garments, attend another Pilates class, drink half of a green juice mostly consisting of celery, and fall asleep at 8:00, ready for another refreshing day in this contemplative, "meaningful" life.

Does this sound…at least a little familiar to you? If it doesn't, I'm very happy you've maintained your sanity and avoided the dark, insatiable pits of the Internet. And if it sounds familiar, welcome to the club (and hello, fellow teen girl). These seemingly flawless women, toned and sculpted to perfection, posting about their every move, are the pinnacle of fitness culture gone haywire. So I'm going to start with where the myth began: with a 19th-century German immigrant named Joseph Pilates.

Pilates, who was born in 1883 in a town near Düsseldorf, Germany, has an origin story that has become a near-myth for his followers. He suffered immensely as a child with several ailments: rickets, asthma, and rheumatic fever, and from his childhood onward, he dedicated his life to physical strength in its many forms. His father introduced him to gymnastics, martial arts, boxing, and bodybuilding, which helped him regain his

confidence and strength as a teen. Pilates eventually came to believe that the modern lifestyle (including insufficient posture and inefficient breathing) was the cause of poor health. He spent the early 20th century traveling around Europe as a circus performer and gymnast.

In Joseph Pilates' time, muscular men and women were not the norm. Defined muscles were seen as an oddity: a sight at the circus, along with bearded women and elephants. It was a far cry from today, when muscles are the aesthetic standard. "It was less that people were like, 'Oh, I want to look like that,' and more, 'Look at these weirdos who spend all day training,'" said Natalia Mehlman Petrzela, PhD, a fitness historian at The New School.

When World War I broke out, Pilates was in England. He was arrested (once the authorities realized he was German) and sent to a camp on the British Isle of Man. There, he developed his technique by watching cats chase birds, admiring their vitality, and concluding that this was due to "frequent stretching." I like to think that the Pilates community includes a fair number of cat ladies who would appreciate knowing this.

He then honed the exercise with the camp's prisoners, and as the legend goes, when the Great Influenza came to the island, none of Pilates' students were afflicted. They allegedly were in better shape when the war ended than when it began. Pilates immigrated to America, where he started his fitness empire based on this method (which he later called "contrology"), working with dance legends such as George Balanchine and Martha Graham, who sent their ballerinas to him to regain their agility and strength. "Contrology Princess" does not have a ring to it.

His beliefs don't all hold up (he also thought that exercising your core would prevent cancer, and that baseball threw bodies out of balance), but after he died in 1967, Pilates' methods have only become more popular.

"It wasn't until the 1990s, when Americans burned out on heart- and body-pounding aerobics and weightlifting, that Pilates exploded from niche to mainstream," Danielle Friedman, author and fitness reporter, wrote for Vogue. "Throughout the decade, a growing roster of professionally beautiful people, from Uma Thurman to Shalom Harlow, began talking up the workout and demand soared."

Pilates was the nation's "fastest growing activity" in the 2000s, with participation increasing by 450%. This is when experts agree the program really took off, although 20 years ago, the public's perception of Pilates wasn't warped by social media and diet culture. ("Diet culture," in its purest form, is the supremacy of thinness: our culture's idolization of a certain body type and the supplements, diets, regimens, and ethos we adopt to reach that standard.)

Back in 2000, Pilates didn't have the "it girl" image it does today. That would come with time. It's interesting to note how what we now call "diet culture" was on the rise at the same time Pilates was becoming popular, and as you'll learn, the two are irrevocably linked. Twenty years ago, diet culture came in the form of: *women need to be thin to be liked, and there is nothing a woman can ever do to be good enough or skinny enough. As a woman, every physical "flaw" is worthy of shame.* As an example of this mode, think of tabloids criticizing wealthy or famous women for the smallest imperfections, or of discussions of weight and body image in movies like *The Devil Wears Prada* or *Bridget Jones' Diary*. In both of these movies, women strive to be as thin as possible: it is implied that being physically perfect is not just an expectation but makes them more worthy people.

This explicit messaging has now warped into something that, at first glance, seems more body-positive. "Get well! Feel like your best, healthiest self!" is the new "get thin." And that's

better…right?

Not exactly.

With the rise of the "fat acceptance" movement in the 2010s, many advertisers were criticized for their lack of diversity. Exposes, books, and posts were written about the impact of our image-centric culture on women. But the multi-billion-dollar diet industry couldn't give up its revenue stream amid a societal shift, so instead, it made its advertisements and products all about being "healthy." Suddenly, "clean eating" was all the rage. Then Paleo! Then Keto! Then vegan! Then…pegan? Pilates was in, and cardio was out. Hip LA women started drinking repulsive beverages: celery juice, raw milk, kefir (please don't try any of them).

But societally, nothing had changed. In this new wellness culture, being fat wasn't bad…unless you were fat. Exercising wasn't about being skinny…unless you weren't already skinny. And, most importantly, women were once again never enough.

The reason Pilates isn't widely criticized as another facet of diet culture is the appearance of wellness. They tell us it isn't about being thin; it's about being healthy. And it's not about your appearance; it's about your lifestyle. 20 years ago, dieters and advertisers would've called it what it was: weight loss and restrictive eating.

Today, the intent of these messages is blurred by a slurry of slogans and attitudes. The women who make "what I eat in a day" videos, which have become pervasive on social media platforms, can call their diets "nourishing," "non-restrictive," and "intuitive," when they're the opposite. Hypocrisy is the breeding ground for internet virality.

While some creators try to make their disordered eating and thinking seem intuitive, some creators lean into past diet culture, reclaiming it as "willpower." There is no better example than the

rise of Liv Schmidt's Skinni Society, a creator who exemplifies the trauma of womanhood in the digital age. (If you're going to use the word skinny, at least spell it right!) People online are telling you to run miles and not eat, and others preach body acceptance. Who are we supposed to believe?

The slogans, diet culture, modeling, and film industries are screaming, "Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels." "A moment on the lips, forever on the hips." #SkinnyTok and the Pilates Princess aren't separate from Roe v. Wade—and the loss of control over our bodies in general. This newest wave of diet culture, driven partly by Ozempic and partly by the current political climate, works because eating disorders have always been about control. It's not really about skipping dinner; it's how skipping dinner makes you feel. Powerful, ahead, God-like, almost. And it's not about Pilates. As Pilates creators often tout, this image makes them feel "long, lean, and slightly superior to everyone else." Superior is the keyword here. Women have rarely felt superior in history or in the present. If we can't gain power through politics, why not gain it through our bodies? The logic seems as sound as anything else in the extremist mindset we currently embody. This current backlash to the body positivity movement of the 2010s has made many women question their values once again.

"Many felt that the movement was in denial about both the practical health risks of being overweight and America's willingness to put its ingrained fat phobia aside," Anne Williams wrote for the Atlantic in an article about Liv Schmidt, SkinnyTok's current "queen." "Ozempic has accelerated that backlash against body positivity. Many of the plus-size leaders of the body-positivity movement shut up and shrank down." Just like Trump wanted to make America great again, thin white women online now want to make America skinny again. Liv Schmidt is

incredibly clear: she barely eats. She promotes this "lifestyle" on Instagram as "truth," as "willpower." Once again, the authenticity drought makes many questionable views popular just because they're "true." A thin girl in the public eye admitting she doesn't eat is something a celebrity would never have done 20 years ago. Instead, they'd say it was just "a lot of exercise" or a "fast metabolism." Honesty means popularity, even if the truth hurts millions of women. Schmidt's rhetoric hasn't been without backlash: Meta removed her ability to sell subscriptions, and TikTok banned the SkinnyTok hashtag. But hypocrisy in the 2020s doesn't cause extinction; it causes growth. Schmidt grew more and more powerful because of, not despite, her extremist views.

"SkinnyTok influencers basically never talk in their videos about politics. They aren't preaching about Donald Trump—let alone about issues such as abortion or immigration," Williams continued. "And yet everything they talk about—the emphasis on girls and how girls need to behave and how small they need to be—is, of course, political."

You might be thinking that women online could simply ignore SkinnyTok and the messages that come with it. Still, these videos find women who are not remotely interested in hearing this restrictive programming. "One account that was set up in the name of a 17-year-old girl liked a single post from a sportswear brand about dieting that appeared in her Instagram explore tab. She then followed an account which was suggested to her after it posted a photo of a 'pre- and post-weight loss journey,'" Jim Waterson reported for the Guardian. "These two actions were enough to radically change the material suggested to the fake teenage girl on Instagram. The researchers found that her explore feed suddenly began to feature substantially more content related to weight-loss journeys and tips, exercise, and body sculpting. The material often featured noticeably slim, and

in some cases seemingly edited/distorted body shapes.' When the experiment – which involved browsing the site for just a few minutes a day – was recreated with a profile posing as a 15-year-old girl, a similar effect quickly took place."

As a teen girl online who mostly follows film and culture accounts, as well as friends' accounts, I am constantly bombarded with this messaging on Instagram. "Give me two weeks to get you fit, firm, and toned!" says one of the ads I've seen dozens of times. The blonde lady bounces in Lululemon over close-ups of her spray-tanned legs. I have endless "small bra" or "large bra" specialized brands on my for-you page, profiting off the insecurities of women of varying body sizes. I scoff at them and never click the links, but it's so easy to stumble upon something disturbing accidentally. And they ask us why we have so many body issues! Because without even asking for it, random women are telling us that "Mindlessly eating is giving grazing animal," as one SkinnyTok creator said.

"If you're 200 lbs, what are you doing in a Pilates class? You should not be allowed to teach Pilates if you have a gut or if you're like, fat." They say wellness culture is subtle in these circles. But no, it's completely overt. Wellness culture wants our bodies surveilled and fought over like battlefields, like borders. The Pilates princess wants us to submit our bodies to American culture by starving ourselves, making ourselves weaker for government and societal gain. They say diet culture is insidious because it causes eating disorders. But it also causes authoritarian control over bodies. Being weak isn't just bad for your muscles and bones; it's what society wants for women. Being able to control us was the ultimate goal. Fascist regimes have time and time again been shown to correspond with control over food and weight. Toned appearances in Nazi Germany and fascist Italy were known to be signs of a "good citizen." But since

so many people are unhappy with our government, they're framing it as health instead of government obedience or patriarchal obedience.

From 1934 to 1945, the Frauenwarte, a Nazi magazine for women, ran biweekly, fronted by blonde women in braids, their blue eyes printed alongside both propaganda and hair tips. In the past, fascist ideologies have come uncomfortably close to "normal" women's discussions and topics. People try to tell you that the media "isn't that deep." "The magazine featured homemaking tips, barefaced makeup, a [Nazi] clean girl aesthetic, but it also ran defenses of anti-intellectualism, and articles on how the Nazi regime supposedly 'benefited women,'" cultural critic Jess Britvich wrote. "Because even though women had no formal power in the Nazi regime, they were still essential in upholding ideology through their roles as housewives and mothers. On the surface, Frauenwarte didn't look political at all, and that's exactly the point. These alt-right pipelines get women to cosign their own disenfranchisement." We have no power in our current regime, but we have power over our bodies and the way we look, just as Nazi women did. Skinnytok is our Frauenwarte.

As my great-grandmother's business was being attacked with shattered glass and death threats, and as she fled Germany for her very survival as a Jewish woman, her German female peers didn't notice because they were too busy reading about bridal schools, natural makeup, and the importance of women and children in the home. When you make your ideology look "pretty," women want to be a part of it. The Pilates Princess is the "pretty" counterpart to everything America wants you to be: fragile, powerless, and obedient. I almost didn't exist because of propaganda, and so many girls won't exist because of diet culture as well.

Men didn't become Nazis because they loved death camps;

they became Nazis because they wanted to support their country, build community, and kill the "enemy." You don't eat cottage cheese because you want to die of an eating disorder; you eat it so you can look like Liv Schmidt and be a TikTok star.

It's stark to think of diet culture as proto-fascism, frightening, even. That's because we're not used to equating what seems "normal" with something that seems so obviously evil. But in times like these, I think we have to. Someone dies of an eating disorder every 52 minutes. 75% of people with eating disorders in the US are women. These eating disorders are not caused by girls' innate desire to shrink, but by the culture we live in. This is the banality of evil, coined by Hannah Arendt as a direct result of fascism: the idea that the most evil things can be the most mundane, the most normalized, or hidden in plain sight. "If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"

It is in our hearts: we want to be loved and to be the best people we can be. It is only natural to fit society's mold, to try to fulfill your hierarchy of needs, even if that means starving yourself. It's not a coincidence, and it never was. Diet culture *is* the banality of evil, is the dictator lurking in the Ozempic ad, is Mattel's instruction to simply not eat. We are being eaten alive and calling it normal.

In 1995, Dr. Anne Becker, an anthropologist and psychiatrist at Harvard Medical School, set up a seemingly innocent experiment: she introduced television to a rural community in Western Fiji, previously untouched by Western media. In Fiji, a place that traditionally valued robust bodies, the girls being exposed to this media learned, whether conscious or uncon-

scious, that thin is superior, that their own bodies were made to shrink. After 3 years of TV exposure, nearly 70% of girls exposed to television started dieting. 11% of adolescent girls reported purging. Our media ecosystem is so propagandistic that when one part—not even social media, not even magazines, only television—is introduced, girls' bodies are in danger. Then add Instagram to that. Add constant social pressure that accumulates over a lifetime. The 70% isn't a stark statistic; it's a jumping-off point. Our media system could not even be called media at that point: it's propaganda for eating disorders.

Like the tradwife trend of the 2020s, there's a certain way we can take traditional femininity too far in its ethos. To me, the Pilates princess trend isn't about being our authentic selves as women, or even about being feminine in ways that appeal to us. In the Pilates princess model, women must be spiritually evolved, limber, flexible, caffeinated, and eternally satisfied creatures to ever feel like enough. This isn't "reclaiming femininity" or changing how women can express themselves. It's reinforcing the same fucked-up system that has ruled our wallets, waistlines, and ways of thinking for decades.

At its core, I don't think the Pilates princess is all about fitness. This trend is about how the internet romanticizes femininity and life, how young women are expected to look and perform—the perfected routines and polished appearances of a life that, in reality, isn't that simple.

Trying to imbue things that seem boring or mundane (like low-intensity exercise classes, tight pants, and tea) with deeper meaning or status reflects what we feel we can control about ourselves. It's a simple notion that if we take care of ourselves by doing the "normal things" (skincare, exercise, eating beautiful food), things might start to feel a little easier. This ideology feels

simple and easy, pretty and aesthetic, when it's another form of control over our bodies and lives. Just like Frauenwarte, it's the perfect, pretty package to get you to stay silent.

Pilates Princesses online and in the media act as if this is a fun, meaningless new trend, like girls suddenly looking punk or wearing monochrome outfits. In reality, this trend is as calculated and elite as wellness culture itself. This image requires that women be effortlessly thin, toned, white, wealthy, happy, and well-dressed. That we have mountains of discipline. That food is the enemy, and you need to pay tens of thousands of dollars a year for classes that don't even have the same effect as lifting weights in the gym a couple of times a week. This isn't cute, it's not sweet, and it's not aesthetic. It's monetizing impossible, elitist, racist, misogynist standards, and quite literally killing women.

The Pilates Princess's image is clear, and the women online make sure she can only represent a very narrow margin. What we've always been told we have to be. They brand her as an aspiration, as if you could change your body by paying thousands of dollars. But this excludes genetics, ethnicity, and life circumstances. They paint her as if she could be you, just waiting to emerge when you show up for class. That's not reality; that's marketing.

Mental illnesses like anxiety and depression lurk in the shadows of everyday life, but their acute behaviors and symptoms are often endured in gray, windowless hospital rooms instead of at our dinner tables. If a woman refuses dessert, skips meals, and exercises excessively, it's just 'womanly behavior.' It's just 'normal.' And yet, the eating disorders right in front of us, in one in every five women, are the most destructive of mental illnesses out there. According to the NIH, only one-third to one-half of

women will ever achieve recovery from symptoms, and eating disorders are the most deadly of all mental illnesses. And yet they're still perceived as 'feminine.' Does femininity mean death?

Back in Larchmont, I walked around in the wind among the palm trees, counting the Pilates studios as I went, cataloging the number of women holding smoothies. It felt a bit critical, but I wanted to go up and shake them: tell them everything I've learned about this archetype, how it's slowly killing us, all the ins and outs of aestheticization. But I am the anthropologist, so I sat down in a cafe and wrote this instead. Because no matter how many words we type, songs we write, and standards we criticize, they're still in that studio, oblivious, using those torture devices derived from Isle of Man cats, drinking their slush, getting their botox. Emily can't escape the personality, the inseparability of her ego from the way her body looks. None of them can. That's the illness itself.

When you struggle with an eating disorder, the "ED voice" is you. It is inseparable from your very being, just like the nutrients and calories that keep you alive. It's not like when people say, "I have depression," or "I struggle with anxiety." It's who you are—*I am healthy, I am disciplined, I am skinny*. These self-fulfilling prophecies define who you are. You are the illness, and society tells you you're great for it. You look so good! *You're gonna die*, but you're so pretty! How'd you lose that weight? " I felt bad when I talked about having disordered eating because it didn't go "that far." I wasn't bulimic. I felt almost angry that I hadn't hurt myself more. I hated that society did that to me. I remembered my experience in the psych ward, with the girl who had the IV in her arm, only bones and skin, her heart rate monitor beeping in the dark room, nobody checking on her. You think that eating less is going to land you the cover of a magazine, but it really just puts you in a dark room with needles in your arms,

begging for your life.

Most women in Hollywood have disordered eating—heck, most women in America do! The Gillings School of Public Health found that three out of four American women have disordered eating. But they barely, if ever, admit to this except for when they're on the other side. 1200-calorie diets, eating only salads, intermittent fasting, green juice, working out 7 days a week…these aren't wellness. Liv Schmidt and diet culture as a whole make the very thing that kills us (not eating) look like true living. These habits are eating disorder behaviors made to be normal. They're death, but aesthetic.

The problem is, there's no exact line for when you become "too skinny" for Hollywood. There's no specific barometer for when you're pretty enough, thin enough, toned enough. You don't ever say, "I think I'm done being hot." It's an endless battle, the Sisyphus of modern womanhood. It doesn't ever stop. Society leaves us in a circle of validation-seeking. Patriarchy tells us our bodies are objects to be sold. There's a sneaky logic to this: if we fit the standard, or at least try to, they might listen to our minds. They might care about our feelings. If people aren't busy thinking about how we look, they might have time to think about how we feel, what we want. Aesthetic standards are a major obstacle to women's success. CEOs must be pretty and skinny for their ideas to count, and pop stars must starve themselves to make good music. Hot means worthy. So the patriarchy murders us with its insidious messaging, forever blurring the lines between health and womanhood, thinness and worth.

In a post-Roe world, diet culture isn't just a mass mental illness. It's a desperate grasp for control. We can't control our reproductive autonomy, but we can control our intake. That's what makes this so pathological. We're only looking for con-

trol over our own bodies, and we end up harming our health, our future selves, and other women while doing it. The Pilates Princess isn't just a character in this book; she's what happens when all we can control is how much food we put into our bodies, what mascara we wear. She's a futurist, fatalist fantasy in Alo leggings. And we need to kill her.

Chapter 5: "Sad Girl Pop,"
or: the Porn-ification of Feeling

❦

You're sad, aren't you? Step up to the stage.

When a sixteen-year-old girl, famous for singing songs about depression and the modern experience, wears only baggy clothes because she wants to be taken seriously for her art, that's how you know that something is wrong with our society.

Billie Eilish became famous for her simultaneous vulnerability and irony– the Gen Z contradiction that makes all stars in this era famous. Be authentic enough, but fit into the machine. Eilish was only 13 when her song "Ocean Eyes," written by her brother Finneas, went viral on SoundCloud. In the blink of an eye, she signed a record deal and had a major audience. She was also deeply depressed, struggling with chronic pain, Tourette's Syndrome, self-harm, cyberbullying, and the impossible standards for teen girls. Eilish was dehumanized in so many ways as an underage child that her only defense was to hide her body, make her body invisible while her voice stayed loud. She did it to make people take her seriously, rather than becoming another Britney in underwear on Rolling Stone's cover at age 16. This is what they do to us. Being sad isn't revenge so much as resignation to the fact that our sadness will be consumed anyway. We'll be sexualized even when we're screaming in arenas about suicidal ideation. We don't have defenses, but we write, sing,

scream, and listen to songs anyway. We do it because sadness has become part of how we cope with our current condition as girls; it's also part of how we reclaim our own version of femininity. And whatever version of sadness and femininity we embody, someone always wants to see us naked.

While researching this book, I spent some time on a local college campus. I was stopped by a man who asked if I'd been in a film. Because of my film content analysis and television appearances, I thought I was being seen for my work. His "pick-up line" picked up on my career without him even knowing it. "Age is just a number," he said to me. I was newly sixteen. My entire body was disgusted because I realized that I was being used not just for my appearance, but that my public image would always be about how I looked, how I dressed, and whether I was appealing or not. "You might never see me again," he said. "Watch me on television instead," I said, trying to dismiss him as I ran away. If I cried, he'd use it. If I screamed, he'd use that too. He only wanted one thing. My thoughts didn't matter. Oh no, I'm being the girl who doesn't care. I'm playing a role I didn't even audition for. And every woman who's ever been looked at plays a role, too.

Isn't sadness the only sane response? Modern "sad" music isn't about performance, but rather a sobbing, screaming confession that we're not alright (or sometimes, in the case of Billie Eilish, it's only a whisper). The music deemed "sad girl pop" isn't a girl in her bedroom crying about a boy; it's a girl who feels so hunted, so objectified, and so trapped that the only thing she can do is write about her impossible position.

Sad girl pop isn't gratuitous angst, and it's not a surrender to emotion, either. It's a battle cry straight from the front lines of girlhood. Unlike men, women don't have the time to develop a healthy sense of self, sexuality, and safety. We are stuck between

feeling too observed and feeling inadequate. We're overcome by paranoia and loss of safety, and at the same time, a genuine need to feel wanted, needed, and loved. Critics are scared of female sadness, anger, and the power of words in songwriting because a song is the easiest way to make someone feel something.

During the government's release of the Epstein files, alt-pop songwriter Sofia Isella released a song called "Above the Neck." Isella dresses and performs like a classic "sad girl," but her songs are about the visceral experience of being a woman. She wears t-shirts that say "I'm Not Yours" and wants to make you feel seen or horrified, or more often, both. Opening with lyrics like "*You're twelve looking twenty, and twenty looking twelve*" and "*you're tight, you're baby, and you're sexy about it*", Isella spares no punches in her takedown of the child-fetishizing, infantilizing incel culture of the 21st century. The track is spoken word—it sometimes reads as rap, and sometimes as alternative —but as with many "sad girl" artists, the sound doesn't matter as much as the message: women screaming and speaking up and shooting arrows against a culture that never lets us go unguarded. Our tears are bullets. And those bullets hold us together. But they're also put in the hands of people who will use them, use us. Every act of vulnerability makes us more vulnerable to eyes and judgment and sexualization that we didn't want.

"Sad girl" music has always existed.

With each wave of feminism came a corresponding "confessional" female singer/songwriter, or many. The second wave came with personal, lyrically sharp women like Joni Mitchell, Carole King, and Carly Simon. The third wave, a 1990s punk-infused rage movement, arrived with Alanis Morissette, Sheryl Crow, Fiona Apple, and Liz Phair. So the idea that women could showcase vulnerability and musical skill simultaneously, and that their music could be popular, and even revered, is nothing

new. But this current era of "bedroom style" sad-girl pop does reveal a new vista in the landscape of women's music today.

In the internet age, it can feel as if people only share the flawless, sun-tanned, colorful Thai wellness retreat versions of themselves. When people do post about the hardships in their lives, it's often after the fact. Have you ever seen somebody post, "I'm really not doing well, and I need help?" Usually, it's a reflection on how they have struggled and triumphed over it—because truth is the internet's kryptonite. That's not to say that people don't post about mental health and hard things, but it is more often than not centered on a romanticized, heavily edited version of reality. In the mental health chapter of this book, I completely subvert this online stereotype, just like sad girl pop does.

You can't change that you've had your heart broken or your life ruined by the end of the song. You can't say it doesn't hurt anymore. You have to acknowledge that you're vulnerable.

It was 1967. Joni Mitchell stood alone on a stage in Ann Arbor, Michigan. She began to pluck her guitar, staring at the audience through cigarette smoke. "I had a king in a tenement castle/ Lately he's taken to painting the pastel walls brown/He's taken the curtains down," she sang in a controlled, high-pitched inflection, with only her guitar accompanying her. She wrote the lyrics herself. Real pain, real guitar, real woman. She'd written the song about the end of her marriage to folk singer Chuck Mitchell. Little did she know that her song would become more famous than his. "You know my thoughts don't fit the man/They never can, they never can," she sang in a cadence that was half-wail, half-liturgy, finishing the song off for her audience. They were staring at her, both suspiciously and in awe, at the vulnerability and the power that came with one woman's voice.

While there were many predecessors– women who wrote

songs they'd written themselves, women who sang with guitars. But by the 1970s, the public opened up to hearing more about the messy inner feelings of women, more specifically, white women. And that's when sad girl music officially entered the public consciousness: when "female-centric," feeling-driven songs were acceptable enough to be popular, yet not accessible enough to avoid objectification, romanticization, and intense public speculation. These women weren't free from the patriarchy; the patriarchy had just decided that folk-driven "confessional" songs were popular enough, safe enough, and pretty enough to be released.

Mitchell was free to sing vulnerable, confessional songs about men. Still, if she stepped outside of her "passive folk-y guitar singer in a silk dress" persona, music critics punished her, most notably in the case of her 1975 album The Hissing of Summer Lawns, in which she explored electronica, world music, and jazz sounds, and Don Juan's Reckless Daughter. On this notably controversial album, she explored the persona of a Black man. This is not to say that artists shouldn't be punished for overt racism, but that when Mitchell tried to escape her safe folk persona, music critics, a majority of whom were middle-aged at the time of her releases, did not approve. Mitchell despised the title of "confessional songwriter," which she believed applied only to women, specifically to women in the tradition of poetry such as Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, who both had public personas innately tied to being female. "When I read 'confessional style' in print, there's something in the tone of the way it is delivered that is kind of insulting, like you've flashed in a public place or something, when in fact you are attempting to illuminate the human condition," Mitchell said. "I feel when somebody calls me a confessional songwriter that they've missed the point. There's too much emphasis put on the artist and not enough on the

art. I prefer to be like the 'Wizard of Oz,' where you just see what I've created and I'm invisible." When a woman shares her secrets in public, it's brave; it's a confession as if to a priest. And when men do the same, they are simply singer-songwriters or excellent writers… for a woman to share her story is a diary. For a man, it's art.

The same goes for another "sad girl" artist of the 1970s, Carly Simon. Simon's public image was less of a songwriter and more of a glamorous, aloof woman who had affairs with vain rock stars. Once again, her art was labeled a confession. Her hit song "You're So Vain" led to decades of intense speculation and gossip. Rather than analyzing the art, the lyrics, or Simon's writerly instincts, they wanted to know who she wrote her songs about. Her sadness became speculation. Her art fed into a sexy, glamorous image. Sadness or rage didn't inhibit her image; it fed into the glamour. A woman could now be sad and sexy. It was still, quite frankly, impossible for a woman to write a song about being sad or rageful or tortured without her being beautiful, or at the very least white.

During the same period as the first "confessional" sad girl singer-songwriters, Betty Davis, a singer-songwriter who wrote and produced every single one of her songs, was labeled a "flamboyant funk diva" rather than a true artist. Her identity as an African-American woman inhibited her from becoming confessional. Instead, her personal lyrics about romantic relationships, sexual independence, and female identity fed into her persona as a hypersexualized "nasty gal." Her artistry, production, lyrics, and fashion were only slapped with another, completely different label: she was funk, she was nasty, she was a diva. Each woman writing about her life during this period was placed in a box. Sad white women became confessional guitarists wearing silk dresses and marrying rock stars on boats. Women of color who

wrote their own songs were placed into racialized categories and hypersexualized. So essentially, the sexual revolution of the 1970s was enough to allow women the stage, but not enough to escape the boxes they'd been put in. The same goes for today.

Alanis Morissette sits on a bench in the middle of a desert, eyeliner smudged, hair messy, opening a suitcase. She's added anger to the traditional "confession." She's screaming at the sad girl priest about her ex-boyfriend's new girl, and you somehow can't take your eyes off her because she's so angry that she's actually screaming into the microphone. It's ironic (get it?), It's angry, it's sad, it's completely devastatingly honest, and people still turned her into something she wasn't. They turned her work of art into media speculation about who the song was about, not taking into account that the art was the point. The man it was about was endlessly less fascinating than the fact that she'd written a song tearing him to pieces. Her raw emotional rage became a quintessential 1990s "brand." What was supposed to be angry, sad art turned into plastic and money and tabloids selling like hotcakes. What was cathartic for Morissette turned into a "'90s breakup anthem." She was described as having "jealous bile," being "boldly sexual," and people often called her "crazy" or "perverted" to her face.

By the 1990s, the "sad girl" was also packaged as the "angry girl." And she wasn't treated differently from the originals 20 years earlier. The culture was different, but the response wasn't. While building her career as an authentic singer-songwriter, Morissette was abused and raped by men in the industry from as young as 15 years old. In hindsight, she called the '90s music industry "crass, sweaty and aggressive." "Almost every woman in the music industry has been assaulted, harassed, raped," Morissette said. "It's ubiquitous — more in music, even, than

film. It's just so normalized." Predatory advances Morisette experienced were published in the press as "relationships" rather than abuse. Producers monitored her food intake, which led to a lifelong eating disorder. Although she'd built her persona on authenticity, on real female emotion, they took advantage of her anyway.

Her sadness, anger, and raw emotion didn't allow her to escape objectification. The same is true today. The "sad girl" can't escape the realities of the "girl" in our society. "You took me for a joke/You took me for a child/You took a long hard look at my ass/And then played golf for a while," she sang on "Right Through You," from her hit album Jagged Little Pill. "You took me out to wine dine 69 me/But didn't hear a damn word I said," she sang directly to the industry. Even as Morrisette sang about the pressures and abuse she experienced, nothing stopped the commodification. This reminds me of Olivia Rodrigo, in Morrisette's direct musical lineage. Nearly 30 years later, she released "Vampire," a song about a predatory music industry relationship similar to Morrisette's experience: "The way you sold me for parts/As you sunk your teeth into me, oh/Bloodsucker, fame fucker/Bleeding me dry like a goddamn vampire." Sad girl pop may change, but the industry response doesn't.

If we pretended women had no problems, no struggles, then they would all go away. Right?

Music was in this state in the early 2010s, with Sheryl Sandberg's Lean In feminism equating female empowerment with confidence, personal success, and control. You have to have it all, do it all, feel good about yourself, *and* look amazing—this was the message coming from female pop stars at the time. Taylor Swift was at the peak of her "girlboss" era with her album 1989, and Beyoncé was crafting polished pop tracks about fem-

inism.

To be a woman in popular music at the time, you had to be polished, strategic, and put together—the opposite of a sad girl. Being a feminist was not about vulnerability; it was about appearing perfect. This is the landscape Lana Del Rey's image was born into: one of perfection rather than authenticity.

In the 2010s, Lana Del Rey was lambasted by the press for sharing her true emotions and thoughts about her abusive relationships. And yet, it's true that she was shedding light on a reality so many women face. What if, instead of being required to have everything figured out, we could just share how we felt? What if our emotions were messy and counterintuitive? What if liberation were true honesty?

An authentic, honest, "confessional" female singer/songwriter must walk a delicate line. There's only so much "messy" personal content audiences can take before they start to call you a bad role model. If you're too real, your example "isn't good for young girls," but if you're too polished, you'll be called unrealistic, or worse, fake. Be relatable! But not too relatable. Be a role model, a positive example for all women. All young women in the public eye face this paradox to some degree: there are dozens of double standards, lines to tiptoe along carefully, and measures to avoid the slightest criticism over small things. Once a woman is hoisted into the cultural imagination, she is put on a pedestal of goddess and everywoman, flawless *and* relatable. And somehow she begins to stand in for women as a whole—a position she neither asked for nor wanted. This does not happen with male stars. Timothée Chalamet is not expected to be an example for all young boys. Can you imagine an interviewer telling him that he's setting a bad example by sharing too much or showing too much skin? I don't think so.

The truth is, expecting women in the public eye to be perfect

role models instead of multifaceted humans is yet another facet of the patriarchy. An element of the system that rejoices and then discards talented women as if they are items to be bought and sold. There's no denying that Lana Del Rey has glamorized serious subject matter. Her glamorization had a real effect. And yet, she was also sharing how society had conditioned her to feel. Society programs us and then expects us not to make art, reinforcing the programming. Being a confessional, sad-girl pop star requires a level of responsibility most artists could never meet. Sadness is a form of resistance. Sadness is a form of reclamation. Certain types do more good. Sadness in public is better when it's not dressed up in Jackie Kennedy imagery. But Lana Del Rey was still being honest, still breaking boundaries.

Glamour is the language Lana Del Rey uses to cope with suffering. This makes it too easy for her struggles to feel "aestheticized." Sometimes in music, instead of having the meaning of the art screamed in your face, you have to work and interpret it for yourself. It wouldn't be all aesthetics if you paid attention. That subjectivity scares people. But it's also how all great art functions.

Lana Del Rey was expressing her patterns of abuse, depressive thinking, and relationships in a time when music was upfront about its message. You can't celebrate a woman unless she's on top, the pop world was saying. If she's stuck in a bad relationship, a bad pattern of thinking, in her destructive ways, we can't celebrate her. The world seemed to be saying: women have to be their own saviors. Otherwise, they're not worth celebrating at all. "Lana del Rey has always been a cultural Rorschach test. What you see in her says more about you than it does about her," cultural critic Zachary Hourihane, creator of the channel Swiftologist, said. You can never fully understand her because there are too many layers at play. Too many controversies to

connect. She wasn't "particularly interested in feminism," she married a Republican, she's late to her concerts, she has a history of cultural appropriation, and she told the Guardian in 2014 she "wished she was dead already." And yet she still had the audacity, in a Party Rock Anthem pop cultural world, to write about how she actually felt.

"What critics often failed to grasp about Lana in those early days is that she wasn't endorsing these dynamics," Hourihane continued. "She was documenting them because they happened to her. Her music has never arrived with a neat moral. She didn't say, 'Here's how I healed.' She says, 'Here's how it felt.' And in the 2010s, when pop was becoming increasingly self-aware, performative, and socially strategic, that kind of raw, ambiguous storytelling made people very uncomfortable."

I don't particularly like her as a musician for many reasons: her song length, her style, and the rambling. I don't appreciate that she typed up a post in May 2020 amid a pandemic and George Floyd's murder to ask why she couldn't "sing about dancing for money like Doja Cat," as if her malalignment by the industry was inseparable from race. She erased the sexualization and exploitation of women of color in one sentence by stating that they were "allowed" to be sexual and free, rather than sexuality expressed by women of color being a completely radical reclamation in our culture. She's allowed to be criticized, to be wrong, and to be out of touch, and yet she can still be revolutionary in her own way. She *was* revolutionary by showing women in culture that they could say what they wanted without fear, that not every song had to be an inspirational "Firework."

What if "here's how it felt," stripped away of all controversy, all allegations, all image, was truly groundbreaking in its time and place? There are so many ways this "sad girl" Tumblr-mascara-suicide aesthetic she participated in was wrong. And yet she still

made art. She still kept the spotlight. Culture seems incapable of holding two truths at once: her art is problematic. It's still revolutionary.

"The sadness of girls should be recognized as an act of resistance. [A] limited spectrum of activism excludes a whole history of girls who have used their sorrow and their self-destruction to disrupt systems of domination. Girls' sadness [...] is a way of reclaiming agency over our bodies, identities, and lives," Audrey Wollen, an artist who created "Sad Girl Theory," wrote. Girls being sad has been categorized as an act of passivity and, therefore, discounted from the history of activism. It doesn't have to be a huge march in the streets, noise, violence, or rupture. Girls' sadness isn't quiet, weak, shameful, or dumb; it is active, autonomous, and articulate. It's a way of fighting back." Wollen argues that our sadness is an informed reaction. Suicide is the #1 cause of death for girls aged 15-19, according to the World Health Organization. Therefore, female sadness should be accepted, talked about, and supported. But it has to be approached in a specific way, showing how being a girl is hard, but suicide and self-destruction aren't healthy reactions.

But since we live in a patriarchal society, the patriarchy leaks into many women's inner sadness, raising the question: since these songs and "confessions" have so much influence, should they be carefully calibrated to empower girls as much as possible? Or is speaking your truth in itself empowering? The answer is somewhere in between. As with Lana Del Rey, Gracie Abrams fits in a similar sad-glamorous-mellow music lane. A striking similarity between them is their submissive lyrics. While it was a common debate during the 2010s, the era of brash anthem feminism, to take down Lana Del Rey for singing "he hit me, and it felt like a kiss," Abrams' subtle submission in the era of

the tradwife aesthetic blurs the lines between free expression and patriarchal conditioning.

Her two most popular songs are I Miss You, I'm Sorry, and I Love You, I'm Sorry. Her brand is centered on giving everything to a man and getting nothing in return. And because she's "heartwrenchingly honest," it's seen as an okay influence. "Like I thought we'd get married/But I guess not/Now you can watch me hit the wall," she sings in Hit the Wall. "I burn for you, and you don't even know my name. If you asked me to, I'd give up everything to be close to you," she sings in "Close to You." It's so subtle and baked into culture that you almost don't even notice that Abrams seems to have no agency in most of her songs, a passive observer to relationships devolving into Oedipal-scale prophecies, breakup after breakup, hitting the wall, begging. This is quite the opposite of Eilish, who writes cutting dismissals of a breakup and the internet with total confidence. The question isn't whether they're good artists, but what their impact is on the sad girl canon. And how much responsibility do they have to the girls screaming their lyrics?

On one hand, we have the idea that all expressions of emotion from a woman are radical in an era that wants to silence us. But under that framing, would a video of a female Trump supporter spouting angry rhetoric also be radically feminist? That's not the case. On the other hand, whether she knows it or not, Abrams is subtly sending messages to already-compromised women about their role in romantic relationships and their position of power in society. And it makes her fans ask even bigger questions: if Abrams can't win, who can?

The answer is more nuanced than someone on the internet might typically prescribe: female artists should be encouraged to share their feelings freely and widely, and encourage all other women to do so as well. But they're also responsible for who

their messages indoctrinate. Sad girls should empower other sad girls, not make them even more susceptible to dysfunction. They should acknowledge that they have power, and with power comes responsibility—the responsibility to change lyrics if needed, to avoid including songs, and to think about what they're telling the whole world. The artist's responsibility isn't to make everything flawless, but to do as little harm as possible. And for now, perhaps even a self-aware lyric or one song about embodied empowerment outside of romance will do.

The reign of the Sad Girl wasn't over when the "suicidal mascara Tumblr girl" receded into the shadows. The sad girl didn't die at all. She only began. Billie Eilish was about to blow up for singing about Xanax, suicidal ideation, and sleep paralysis. We'd stripped away the black mascara running and substituted it for Eilish drinking black tar and crying it from her eyes. Lana Del Rey's romanticized, cute sadness and abuse narratives were replaced with the real realities of mental illness in women, with true interiority and less persona. But the sexualization never left.

New York Times critic Jon Pareles remarked that Eilish was "the negation of what a female teen-pop star used to be. She doesn't play innocent, or ingratiating, or flirtatious, or perky, or cute. Instead, sullen, depressive, death-haunted, sly, analytical, and confrontational, all without raising her voice." And despite this "anti-flirtatiousness," even though a clip of her went viral talking about her bathroom habits, she was still sexualized to an extreme.

The release of Billie Eilish's debut album, *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?* in March 2019, sparked a moral panic among older generations. Older critics declared Eilish the number one example of the "trendification of suicide in pop culture," telling readers to "beware the pop princesses romanticizing

death" and suggesting that Eilish was "giving voice to angsty Gen Z—and making healthy teens wish they were depressed."

Eilish's depression-whisper songs had adults feeling out of control and teens feeling seen like never before. "[Her] frank exploration of mental health, addiction, and self-harm had concerned parents wringing their hands while their children rejoiced at a pop star being weird and depressed just like them," Pitchfork critic Quinn Moreland remarked.

She was weird and depressed. She was the first mainstream pop star of our generation. She sampled a random episode of The Office in "My Strange Addiction." She made a climate anxiety song that directly invokes the devil. She's watching porn to distract herself from a breakup and directly critiquing it in a single song. She's both totally serious and completely ironic, often at the same time. She's the newest reincarnation of the "sad girl."

There's a very specific intonation to "sad girl." It's a white, skinny, wealthy woman. What happens when she confesses her sadness versus someone who isn't non-disabled, straight, or white? We need to hold space for all types of female sadness. Music is the way to open that up. "With white singers like Billie Eilish, Lana del Rey, and Phoebe Bridgers at the forefront, are women of color being excluded from the sad girl pop phenomenon?" Isabella Gemignani wrote for HerCampus in 2022. Women of color are integral to the sad girl pop phenomenon. There's space for all of us to write about sadness. One of my favorite sad girl pop artists is SZA, who is often placed in the R&B category despite writing songs about sadness, relationships, and her inner life, as most of these artists do. This is the same thing we saw happen to Betty Davis, who was put in a category that didn't recognize her songwriting skill or vulnerability. That's not to say these artists shouldn't be placed in the R&B category, but they should be recognized as multi-genre,

multi-dimensional, rather than being put into a box yet again.

SZA has broken this box right open by choosing when to be sexual, being in complete control of her image, and allowing her music to be heartbroken, horny, and insecure at the same time. "Leave me lonely for prettier women/You know I need too much attention for shit like that," she sings in "Supermodel" from her debut album CTRL. "I don't see myself/Why I can't stay alone just by myself/Wish I was comfortable just with myself/But I need you, but I need you, but I need you." SZA's lyrics are often so vulnerable that they bring out intense sadness or recognition in the listener, which is what all sad girl pop does." Women of color have been a part of the sad girl pop movement for a while and have revolutionized the subgenre with their own personal experiences of racism and microaggressions. Yet, they have still been excluded from the narrative because they don't fit into the idealized aesthetic and mold of a sad girl," Gemignani continued. "As women of color embrace the feminine sadness of sad girl pop, it should be read as a way of resistance: women of color artists are here, and they will be heard."

It's incredibly reductive that we've reduced "sad girls" to a specific type of woman when there are so many perspectives, intersections, and ways to be sad. Recognizing the difference in our experiences is a great way to help us cope.

In my view, there are two major forms of female pop stars these days. Sad Girls (Olivia, Billie, Sofia Isella) and Playboy Winky dancers (Sabrina Carpenter, Tate McRae). The winky dancers know they're hot and know they're being consumed sexually. Sad girls are honest and vulnerable, and they're consumed anyway. Being a woman in the public eye requires some form of sexuality that men never have to think about. When Olivia Rodrigo screams onstage in a red bikini, even though she's singing about

impossible beauty standards, she'll still be measured up, and people will discuss her boobs on the internet. The only difference between the two types is that the deliberately sexual, dancing, "traditional" form of female pop star that began with Madonna, knowing she's being sexy. That somehow makes her more palatable and more popular, in numerous ways. This type of Playboy pop star is only accessible to white women. If a Black woman were to pose on all fours on an album cover as Carpenter did, she would be seen as vulgar and disgusting. Megan the Stallion is ridiculed for her sexuality, while Sabrina Carpenter does similar things; she's performing an act of subversion. "This isn't just about what Sabrina is doing; it's about who gets to do it and still be protected," video essayist Diana Simumpande, who runs the cultural criticism channel afrodizijak, said of Sabrina.

"Race, class, and body politics don't just shape performance. They shape permission. Who gets to eroticize obedience and still be respected? Who gets to be messy, sexually provocative, and still be safe? And who doesn't? No matter how clever, how beautiful, or self-aware they are, context matters because I couldn't also see the video captured on multiple cameras showing Diddy assaulting his then girlfriend, Cassie Ventura, [pulling her by the hair] in a hallway at a Los Angeles hotel in March 2016. Except this time, there was no soft lighting, no wink, no irony; it was just violence. So when I see a white pop star posed with her hair in a man's grip, styled like a pet and sold as empowered, I can't unsee the similarities in those images. And that's the thing about imagery like this. It's not just about what it shows. It's about who gets to survive the performance." Who sings and who hears matter a whole lot more than lyrics or tabloids when it comes to persona. Sad girls, and pop stars in general, are received differently, not because of who they are or their specific eccentricities, but because of race, beauty, and

countless other benchmarks they could not choose. Who gets to cry on camera without being called weak? What packaging makes certain emotional reactions safe?

Carpenter's cover for Man's Best Friend exploded across the Internet and was discussed among all major outlets. Was it exploitation? Should a woman be held on a leash, even if it's her choice? Was she reinforcing porn's impossible standards and submission, or was she satirizing it? And did this conversation even matter anyway?

"While people are writing essays about whether Sabrina's leash is empowering, women are being bombed in Palestine, raped in Congo, and sterilized in ICE detention centers. But this is what makes the news," Simumpande continued. "This is what feminism becomes when it's being gutted of solidarity and sold back to us as merch. And if feminism can't hold all of us, can't center the real shit, then what exactly are we fighting for here?" This is the same contradiction I discussed in the Barbie chapter: should we really be talking about Oscar nominations when women are dying from treatable causes and suffering through domestic violence? It's an unanswerable question, because no matter what happens to women around the world, pop culture keeps functioning, people keep making art and sharing their stories, even if they're privileged compared to others' struggles. I think Olivia Rodrigo is the perfect case study for how to approach this: she writes about societal expectations and breakups, but she also has a charity for reproductive rights and champions safety around abortion post-Roe v. Wade. It's black-and-white thinking if you believe that only one type of struggle matters. Artists can talk about their experiences and give back. Artists can center others and themselves simultaneously. The most responsible approach for privileged women singers is to acknowledge that their struggle is nowhere near as horrific as

that of many women around the world, and to use the power they wield to help them as well as themselves. That's the power of pop culture when it's channeled at its best: creating art and funneling power and resources to women who really need them.

When Billie Eilish wore only baggy clothing for the first few years of her career, it wasn't a single instance that meant nothing. It was a fact about our world, our whole world, that sexualizes girls and then blames them for existing. You could look at her, one of the most famous pop figures of our time, and see millions of other underage girls around the world, fighting to be seen as more than flesh. In 2021, when Eilish released her album Happier Than Ever, she made an accompanying short film called "Not My Responsibility."

"Though you've never seen my body/You still judge it/And judge me for it/Why?" Her voice asked as she looked into the camera, black nails taking off her jacket as she shed layers. "Some people hate what I wear/Some people praise it/Some people use it to shame others/Some people use it to shame me/But I feel you watching/Always." At the end of the video, she wades into water, black in the light, and disappears under it, invisible to the camera. The eyes never stop watching her. Our world is built of these eyes, a ruin, an empire of male fantasies building on itself. "Male fantasies, male fantasies, is everything run by male fantasies? Up on a pedestal or down on your knees, it's all a male fantasy: that you're strong enough to take what they dish out, or else too weak to do anything about it. Even pretending you aren't catering to male fantasies is a male fantasy: pretending you're unseen, pretending you have a life of your own, that you can wash your feet and comb your hair unconscious of the ever-present watcher peering through the keyhole," Margaret Atwood wrote in her novel The Robber Bride. "Peering through the keyhole in your own head, if nowhere else. You are a woman

with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur." It is indeed undeniable: to be watched is to be a woman.

The inevitable part of being a woman in the world, famous or not, is that you will be sexualized. But it's even worse in our current porn-infested society. 93% of boys are exposed to pornography before the age of 18. The male gaze has become porn's gaze. And therefore, any true emotional expression that women show in the public eye becomes porn as well. And the crazy thing about this is that sad girl pop is quite literally the opposite of porn. For women in pornography, there's no interiority besides moans. All the consuming men want is to know they're not raping a woman. They often don't care how she feels, as long as it's morally okay. Sad girl pop gives us contradictory emotions, real pasts, real feelings, real screams. We get to write about our commodification, our obsessions, our personhood. Sad girl pop is messy, angry, and usually not intended to be read sexually, and yet the music and the woman become porn anyway because the way we view women is sick.

Sad girl pop gives us no closure, just like life gives us no closure. People hate women writing about their feelings because, in a lot of ways, society has directly caused those feelings of angst, hatred, and sadness. Women have been told for millennia that our emotions are hysterical, when in reality, they are our power. Emotions make change. The art we make also happens to feed into the patriarchy in ways we don't expect. But we can't stop feeling, stop writing, or stop singing because they'll sexualize or commodify us. We have to be aware of the contradiction and choose art anyway.

And yes, I'll be stopped on the street again. Yes, someone will tell me they think I'm a slut for wearing red lipstick because I'm supposed to either stop existing or look like a porn star. When

this book comes out, some people will likely sexualize me. And I still keep writing, because not writing is succumbing to everything wrong with our society. That's what sad girl pop is—a resignation that, despite commodification, our voices matter. I will cry because people got the wrong idea about what I was trying to say, and then someone would probably find that crying sexy anyway, because, well, this is America in the 2020s.

In chapter 8 of this book, I write about psychiatric institutionalization and my experiences with mental illness. People will think that's sexy as well. They'll romanticize it because people buy female pain no matter how it's sold. If it's sold, it's bought. And when sadness is bought, it becomes commodified, sexualized, turned into something it never was.

Each of us has a different body to be sexualized, a different environment to contend with. Women of color have historically been animalized. For white women, there's a possibility of showing more skin or being more sexual without being immediately boxed into a stereotype. For women of other backgrounds, there are other histories, stigmas, and stories to uphold with their own bodies. The case in point is the same for all of us. The eyes are inescapable.

The Epstein Files showed us that no aspect of girlhood was immune to abuse: no girl was too young. Sex trafficking and porn rob women of any agency. Creating music, cultural criticism, and personal lyrics in this era of mass female exploitation is an act of defiance. It's proof that we're not hairless teenage Victoria's Secret models in bikinis, that we have thoughts, sadness, and interiority. That's how simple it is: feeling human.

I believe that the treatment of young women as objects devoid of interior lives and control has not receded with feminism. Rather, this treatment has been wheeled behind a curtain where men are free to do whatever they want, as long as they

are powerful.

"The Epstein rapes were aided by money, elite networks, and institutional corruption, but at their core, they are explained by patriarchy.5 Perhaps you are thinking, well, duh, that's obvious. I think so too. And yet, guess how many times the word patriarchy is used in those 12 articles up there? The ones where the New York Times, the BBC, PBS, and TIME try to explain the Epstein files? Zero," Celeste Davis wrote for her Substack, Matriarchal Blessings. "Okay, fine, but patriarchy is an unpopular word. Guess how many times gender inequality comes up? Also zero! Patriarchy holds both the explanation and the remedy for the Epstein scandals and yet is rarely brought up in Epstein discussions."

Men with control in our society can wield power over women of any social standing, because that's simply how the power structure is built. We don't want to blame systemic rape among the wealthiest people in the world on patriarchy, because then we would have to abolish the system that upholds everything. "[This approach] ensures we keep whacking weeds (things that make rape easier), without ever whacking the root of rape itself (patriarchy)," Davis continued. We say it was an abuse of power because it happens all the time. It's easier to call it that than to say that our system is doing this to women every day, all the time. At some point, we must admit that "abuse of power" is normal in a patriarchal system, and that teenage girls are the ones holding everything up, while we're being raped.

"Epstein is the patriarchy's logical conclusion. We do ourselves a disservice when we call Epstein and his ilk monsters or a bizarre glitch of elite decadence," Jo Ann Finkelstein, PhD, a psychologist and author, wrote for her Substack, Raising Her Voice. (Most, if not all, connections between Epstein and the patriarchy are written by women and published on Substack,

not major news outlets.) Same with sad girl pop: when you separate the individual from society, you minimize the genuine emotions and motivations that a society brings out in every person. Treatment of individuals is in no way disconnected from society and its values. The desires and actions of the elite, the artists, the "lower class" — everyone in a society — are influenced by a stream of values that shape actions and emotions. I like to view society and pop culture through the sociological theory of symbolic interactionism, "a framework for building theory that sees society as the product of everyday interactions of individuals." Essentially, for me, this means that no trend, person, or phenomenon is exempt from society's pressures and discrimination.

It's as if each person in a society is hooked up to an IV machine with multiple lines: many influences, whether familial, societal, or cultural, that influence how they act. You can't pull out the patriarchy from the Epstein files. You cannot separate the person or people from society. That's what scares everyone about atrocity, about destruction and power: it was not entirely their choice; it was not a fluke, a flash in the pan. It was the line, the messages coming through to every single person. It could've been you, too. They want the enemy to be the individual man, the individual woman hurt by him. But the sexualization, the harm, and the emotions we are feeling are all coming from a central line.

In 1987, Andrea Dworkin wrote and published a highly controversial book called Intercourse. In it, she analyzed the key ways that several male literary figures treat the female body: through male dominance and objectification or female. submission. "When she is dead, bruised, disfigured, inert, a cadaver, he calls her human. The cost of the recognition is death. In this story of killing, the killing begins when the man starts using the woman up, pillaging her physical resources of strength and

sex. He is calloused to her well-being because her well-being is not compatible with his fucking-and it is the fucking he wants, not the woman as a person," she wrote of Tolstoy's 1889 novella, The Kreutzer Sonata.

This reality of pervasive sexualization until death, when a woman is regarded with a small amount more reverence and personhood, has not changed since Tolstoy's time or Dworkin's. It has morphed into a screen, a Reddit page, an heir of progressivism. When a woman exhibits humanity or personhood and desires that destroy her ability to be seen as only a sexual object, she is often scorned or regarded as "low art" until her death, when she is suddenly viewed as a female genius, because her words stand for her instead of her body. In the modern age, we are so comfortable sexualizing women that almost nothing repudiates that. Confessional songwriters can share their deepest desires and pain, yet be ignored because of the shell they live in. We have been so barraged with information and constant digital stimulation that simply the fact of existence as a woman is substantive enough to be sexualized.

This idea, to me, seems Orwellian—the surveillance state applied to the female body. It is not selective; it is always on, always watching, embedded in the woman's mind and in the man's eye. In Orwell's 1984, the Ruling party controls women to eliminate individual romantic love and redirect it to Big Brother. In the 2020s, the pornographic gaze controls women (down to their most basic emotions), largely eliminates individual romantic love (as we'll see in the BookTok chapter), and redirects it to bodily control and perfection. Similarly, in the book, citizens are watched around the clock through two-way telescreens. If women show signs of sadness, they are flagged and potentially arrested by the Thought Police, as sadness proves they have an inner life. In a way, sexualizing sad women is its own way of

"arrest," filtering her inner life through pornography. Both societies are intensely afraid of women's true emotions and will view them, condemn them, or sexualize them in any way to make them less powerful.

Pain, screams, lyrics, performance—you name it—none of it can shatter the myth, because the gaze itself is the issue. Only until a woman is no longer an object do men realize her full humanity. Only when she is no longer a singing, bouncing, screaming object, but a cadaver, does she become truly human. Nothing we say will ever be enough. As much as we like to think we have changed, the case of Epstein was no different from the central paradigm of The Kreutzer Sonata: under patriarchy, the male gaze cannot see women as fully human beings. Male conquest has morphed into something far more cancerous: a way of seeing that usurps the entire soul, consuming everything in sight. The Madonna is now the whore.

For a lot of women, the only rational way to respond to a patriarchal society is through emotion. Emotion that we are told not to exhibit, to push down. If we cannot change society, the most radical thing we can do is express the contradictions we feel. When you cannot change a system, when you do not have the power to change your experience, your voice, whether a whisper or a scream, becomes all you have. Sad girl pop is a direct reclamation of personhood in patriarchal society.

Our careers are porn. Our feelings are porn. Our clothes are porn. Even our screams are porn. When can we stop being sex and start being people?

Chapter 6: BookTok
or: Why We Choose a Romantic Recession

❦

It's around noon, and I'm sitting in the air-conditioned palace of Barnes & Noble. One of the girls I'm observing squeals with joy when she realizes there's a Starbucks here. A plethora of girls my age wander by, in different groups, from different places. They're all going to the romance section.

I watch them pick up books with jacked hockey players, slow-burn lesbian romances, books they heard of on BookTok—"my friend has 100k followers on BookTok," one of them says, grinning—and they're all happy just being together looking at words. The romance section is the 2020s version of "romance gossip."

It's not because we're "too sophisticated" for the real world; it's because I think we all decided that a lot of it pales in comparison to…jacked hockey players? But seriously, the options are endless in this aisle of books, and it's not that the romance novels themselves have changed *that* much in the last 20 years.

What if we've decided the equation of heterosexual relationships—demographics, experience, and all—is just not worth it? What happens then? The answer can be found in the pastel section of your local Barnes & Noble. Reclaiming femininity is reclaiming romance novels. Because at this point, a book is better than reality. But do you know what's less depressing? A love story. And two people getting married, what an innovation!

A story where the guy you're dating doesn't secretly hate trans people or watch Andrew Tate.

Romance doesn't feel predictable anymore because, well, it genuinely isn't predictable to us. Marriage and birth rates are declining. This isn't a bad thing; it's a fact that affects a culture and the media we consume.

The truth is, Gen Z men are failing in many ways. To get girls, to get jobs, to find their faith. That's why they laugh at romance novels. The "froth" and "frilliness" they see are a survival tactic backed by expert marketing. Many experts call it Gen Z's fault, along with smartphones, when it's the fault of the patriarchy. Lay blame at the men expecting hairless moaning dolls instead of grown women, the reality television John Wayne on the news stacks, the exhaustion of expectations finally becoming so insurmountable that Gen Z girls finally build our realm of fantasies. Because the stereotypes men hold are not us, they never were.

This "realm" is BookTok. And I like to think the story starts with Jane Austen.

You may remember the Janeites, the predominantly female Jane Austen fans portrayed in media and literature as romantic, daydreaming obsessives. Despite Jane Austen's books being written nearly 250 years ago, her legacy has endured through various interpretations, adaptations, and discussions. Most recently, through movies and books. There were 2005's Pride & Prejudice, 2007's Becoming Jane, The Jane Austen Book Club, and Northanger Abbey, 2020's Emma, 2022's Persuasion, etcetera. Austen's endurance likely has to do with her likable female characters (and sometimes highly unlikable…yes, Emma), who persist in their strength and learn a lesson by the end. Austen follows the basic character-development outline essential to storytelling by having her flawed characters learn hard lessons.

The newest edition of Austen mania has come from BookTok. With the rise of TikTok in the late 2010s, millions of women logged on to share their thoughts on books. Their content ranged from standard book reviews to aesthetic genres to compilations and read-alouds. The BookTok corner of social media experienced massive growth during quarantine and has currently been viewed 310 billion times.

You know how, when a friend recommends a book, you are more likely to read it? If you had millions of friends who were all telling you about their favorite books, that's what BookTok feels like. The common problem of browsing bookstore shelves and being overwhelmed by choice has been solved (or gamified) by the algorithm. Now, instead of mindlessly wandering until you see a premise or author you like, you can watch videos of people recommending books for specific people and reasons. This seems, to many, way more reliable than book blurbs by famous authors eulogizing the work, likely without even reading it. This new form of book recommendation is, when you think about it, bound to be highly effective—not only because it's compelling and entertaining, but because our psychology leans toward more personal advertising methods.

Advertising? You may be wondering. When I first stepped into the BookTok world, I assumed that it was completely separated from the publishing industry: not sponsored, not meddled with. This is far from the truth. Many popular creators are paid to make videos about certain books, sometimes without even reading them. Since its creation, the internet has battled between illusion and reality. It's so easy for things online to be fake, and when we find the one thing that isn't, we cling to it. But the problem with this is that when businesses and organizations get in on the joke, it feels inauthentic, and we drop it as quickly as we can. BookTok has now become a sales tactic for publishers

rather than a place for people to share their true thoughts on books. However, this time it appears to be still going strong.

BookTok is a community primarily of young women, and the books it represents reflect that. The most popular genres include romance, fantasy (and don't forget romantasy), young adult, and historical fiction.

But from what many others and I have observed, it's mostly the romance books that go viral. These books have colorful covers featuring artistic renderings of couples in science labs, on a serene lake, or staring into each other's eyes. Most of the titles include "lovers" or "affair," and most of them are written by white female authors. This, of course, isn't new. That category has dominated the romance genre for a long time (Jane Austen. BookTok is in love with Jane Austen…). But according to many, the books represented can feel exclusive, generic, and predictable. To understand the full scope of the current literary world, we may have to examine why exactly this seemingly harmless online community has garnered so much hate.

We hate things teen girls love. Going back through the decades, it's evident with everything from the Beatles to *Twilight* to Starbucks. "To be a teenage girl is to simultaneously be pop culture's ultimate punching bag, cash cow, and gatekeeper," Constance Grady wrote for Vox. "Teenage girls can love something with elemental purity, with an intensity no one else can ever quite match. That might be part of why they're so good at deciding what's cool: When they commit to something, they commit *hard*." The type of intense, angsty emotion and devotion that we inhabit is hated not *because* it is exclusive to us, but because it exists inside everyone. And the things we hate most about ourselves, the feelings we shove down or ignore, often become the qualities we hate about others.

This reminds me of a poem by Olivia Gatwood, "When I Say

That We Are All Teen Girls." In the poem, Gatwood reflects on how the world of an adolescent girl is reflected in everything and everyone—and how our presence is needed more than any of us realize. "Even the men who laugh their condescending laughs when a teen girl faints at the sight of her favorite pop star, even those men are teen girls, the way they want so badly to be so big and important and worshipped by someone," she wrote.

The pop culture, makeup, and fashion that many teen girls love may seem frivolous. But isn't it just as frivolous as the video games and sports that many teen boys enjoy? Not everything has to be psychologically stimulating (although sometimes I wish it were). It's not like all the teens are suddenly going to start walking around carrying Freud and Moby Dick—and neither will the adults! No art is objective, and it's telling that the "serious" media is dictated by the people in power (older men) and thus reflects that. When Ted Lasso is given 13 Emmys and Never Have I Ever is given zero, and Pitchfork only reviews Taylor Swift after Ryan Adams covers her, we begin to realize that our perception of media is shaped by the people who dominate it, not by its quality.

This is connected to a linguistic phenomenon: the dialects and forms of speech we consider "informal" or deem as less than are actually representations of the groups our society marginalizes (African-Americans, young women, queer people). The language of teen girls, just like that of the queer and Black communities, is maligned and criticized for a reason.

This is exactly why I am so fascinated by topics such as media and language. In many ways, language and media represent our society and social dynamics like a reflection in water—fully and bluntly. The next chapter will shine a light on slang and linguistics—but back to Booktok!

This same automatic hatred of teenage girls' interests is

recurring with BookTok. A new statistical analysis shows that BookTok users are 4 times more likely to be female than male, and 60% are between the ages of 18 and 25. So it makes perfect sense to me why the community is being criticized and maligned so much—it's the right demographic at the right time. It's not that there aren't several big problems with BookTok: many of the criticisms are warranted. However, it is still important to understand why it has garnered so much attention, and that's mostly due to the people who create and consume it.

Criticisms about prioritizing marketability over intellectual quality, a lack of diversity, performative reading, elitism, and the normalization of problematic relationship dynamics have created a controversial space around something as simple as an online book club. But I'd like to approach it as everyone should: by looking at the books themselves.

As a lover of good books, I always got the sense from others that romance novels were somehow "low-brow" or "less than" other forms of literature. Even though I like to think of myself as a critical thinker, I never stopped to wonder why I got this message.

When I first picked up a romance novel, I wrestled with this contradiction. Why is the one "fun" female genre looked down on? Reading romance (at least the good ones) feels immersive and escapist, like turning on Legally Blonde for the 20th time, or listening to peppy pop music. There's something hopeful about these books—and I'm not the only one who feels that way.

The kind of books BookTok promotes are mostly the kind I used to scoff at—the books you might find and briefly look at while you're waiting in an airport bookstore. I'm curious to learn more about exactly why we so often disregard the books that many women read.

There are standout books on BookTok that don't fall under

the usual romantic tropes. One is *I Who Have Never Known Men*, which I was fascinated to learn went viral on TikTok, since it's a feminist dystopia from the 1990s.

"I was initially surprised that BookTok had taken up an obscure literary title, since their tastes tend to run more to romance, romantasy, and generic women's fiction. It's tempting to see the book's appeal as ideologically linked to the 4B movement, a feminist ethos that rejects relationships with men, and which briefly trended online after the November election," Emily Gould, an author and journalist, wrote for *The Cut*. The 4B movement Gould mentions grew out of the widespread misogyny in South Korea—it's an intense approach to feminism, and involves "boycotting men" completely. This is a step up in intensity from what American Gen Z women are doing, but still, the similarities are striking.

It's no surprise, then, that this 1990s dystopian feminist novel has surged in popularity, given its subject matter. The sociopolitical landscape for women is dire right now, and has been for some time. A fresh approach to these topics was needed, but nobody expected it to come from BookTok, a place usually known for its "frothy" romance and fantasy novels. This goes to show the wide variety of books that appeal to my generation; one day we're reading about women confined to a bunker, and the next day it's an ice-skating romance.

Gen Z mostly grew up reading fantasy franchises: there was *Harry Potter, The Hunger Games*, and *Twilight*. There were books like *Keeper of the Lost Cities, Wings of Fire*, and *Percy Jackson*. Fantasy books have been a big domain for as long as there have been children's books. Go to the children's section of any bookstore, and you'll find an assortment of fantasy books in the "classics" section: *The Wizard of Oz, Alice in Wonderland*, and *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

Children, in general, are much more connected to their imaginations than adults. The difference for my generation is that many of us grew up with more entertainment options beyond books, including online gaming, social media, texting, and the wider availability afforded by streaming.

What is our relationship to books? The expansion of entertainment options has led many of us to read less in favor of other media, but, contrary to popular belief, reading isn't declining in popularity that much. Instead, audiobooks and ebooks are becoming increasingly popular; reading articles, fanfiction, and opinions online is at an all-time high, and Gen Z-ers report reading more books than previous generations. It's simply that our ways of consuming books/written works have changed.

And it's not even that the content of our books has changed that much because romance and fantasy have been popular with women for ages, and the popularity of historical romances shows that these stories have a certain timelessness for some readers. The wider response to BookTok (mockery, criticism) echoes the response to the female Jane Austen fans over the past few decades: BookTokers are the Janeites of Gen Z.

One of the most popular writers in the BookTok space is romance novelist Emily Henry. She began her career as a YA novelist but published her first romance, *Beach Read*, in 2020—perfect timing for both TikTok and the pandemic. Her books took off, topping the bestseller list year after year. She's one of the few authors (out of a very limited list) who get mentioned over and over again.

Emily Henry's popularity doesn't come without rightful criticisms. Her books echo the predictability and repetitive nature of modern storytelling. The blonde, white girl who learns a lesson is so overplayed, and Henry replays the same narratives, each time with a slightly different (albeit creative) spin.

Diversity is lacking, especially in non-heterosexual relationships, in Henry's books. But while some of Henry's approaches may be flawed, above all, she serves as an important figure in the literary world, one who validates female desires for fulfilling careers and emotionally equal relationships, and permits us to feel disappointed in romantic pursuits and daydream about better ones.

Rom coms often have the same type of characters: straight-sized, white, conventionally attractive. Particularly with popular online books, you'll mostly see these kinds of people on romance book covers. Investigating the landscape of modern romance novels made me wonder: what message are we sending when we repetitively represent love like this? Isn't it only human that many people who don't fit this standard would feel left out?

I knew that, given the wide array of stories that have become popular with young women in the last decade, there would be outliers that might reflect other parts of the female literary landscape.

Heartstopper, the wildly popular British graphic novel series by Alice Oseman, is a key example of this. The books center on the love story of Nick and Charlie, two teens coming of age as they navigate the challenges of coming out, self-acceptance, and mental health. Surprisingly, I don't think I've ever met someone my age who doesn't like these books. They're relatable no matter what kind of teen you are, because we all struggle to find ourselves in a world we fear might not accept us.

Plus, of course, the graphic novel aspect has only made it more popular—when you see a character's way of speaking, emotions, and expressions, it can be easier to relate. If Millennials had Harry Potter, Gen Z has Heartstopper. And if Heartstopper is our generation-defining literary phenomenon, that says a lot about who we are and the kinds of stories we gravitate towards.

Especially since the series is very open about mental health, friendship, and sexuality, it makes me happy that my generation has widely embraced a story about queer love, because I think it shows that many of us are open to a wide range of stories and people. To me, that's the point of books—to familiarize ourselves with different people and worlds, to learn more about ourselves.

In many ways, the popularity of queer romance in the literary world is a reflection of how, for much of Gen Z, heteronormative narratives fail to satisfy our needs to see ourselves in what we read. Reclaiming romance as something for everyone is a huge part of this. Queer stories model communication and consent much better than many hetero narratives, making them resonate with women who usually see less consensual and meaningful relationships in mass media. Essentially, romance novels are being reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ community as a radical statement: everyone deserves love.

While we still have a long way to go, the diversity of stories we're reading has also widened dramatically.

But back to Henry, because her book Beach Read illustrates something important about romance as a genre. *Beach Read* follows January, an author of romance novels, and Augustus, who writes literary fiction. The book is about the time they spend together living next door to each other in beach houses. It gained popularity on TikTok as a lighthearted romance with some "meaningful" themes and was the first of many successes for Henry. What I found interesting about the book was that it directly addresses critics of romance and "chick lit" by having the main character serve as a writer. "If you swapped out all my Jessicas for Johns, do you know what you'd get?" January rants in an early chapter. "Fiction. Just fiction … but somehow by being a woman who writes about women, I've eliminated half of the

Earth's population from my potential readers, and you know what? I don't feel ashamed of that. I feel pissed."

This quote brings me back to the rise and fall of the term "chick lit," a popular "genre" in the late 1990s and 2000s. The term is defined as "literature that appeals to women," but I find that too vague, so I would describe it as stories that center on women and their struggles with love, female friendships, and the workplace. Usually, these women are urban, heterosexual, and in their 20s or 30s (think *Sex and the City*). Some of the most popular titles in this so-called genre were *Bridget Jones' Diary*, *Waiting to Exhale*, and *Watermelon*. Before the mid-90s, "chick lit" was not part of the vernacular. Scholars and linguists agree that its usage started after the release of Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale*, when Los Angeles Times critic Carolyn See wrote, in a review of the book: "McMillan's new work is part of another genre entirely, so new it doesn't really have a name yet. This genre has to do with women, triumph, revenge, and comradeship." Both *Bridget Jones' Diary* and *Sex and the City* started as columns, and the term rose in popularity when more and more female columnists began writing about their lives, and as similar books were released.

With the rise of this new subset of fiction came a wave of criticism. "I just don't see what's morally or intellectually wrong with reading a book you enjoy and relate to, that might not draw deep conclusions about the future of humanity but might cheer you up after a bad day, or see you through your own health problems," Diane Shipley wrote in her Guardian op-ed titled *In defense of chick-lit*.

"I always find that the people who criticize chick lit, both in the press and to my face, are those who know the least about it." And, indeed, most critics hadn't read their fair share of Jennifer Weiner books, but there was a deeper level of misogyny involved

in pigeonholing books marketed to women as one ditzy pink genre.

One of the most important "chick lit" authors, Marian Keyes, said of the term: "It's meant to be belittling. It's as if it's saying, 'Oh, you silly girls, with your pinkness and shoes, how will you ever run the world?' But as I've matured, I've realized that I'm very proud of what I write about, and I know that the books I write bring happiness and comfort to people."

Beach Read, more so than Henry's other works, discusses the core of books marketed to women: they're stereotyped as "less than" or viewed as other, and they are taken far less seriously. "[Beach Read] was Henry's way of reassuring herself that wanting to write romance in all its sincere, vulnerable glory was worthy of respect," Allison Davis wrote in her Vulture profile of the author. Emily Henry's pastel covers and "genuine" characters appeared against a backdrop of growing isolation among Gen Z and Millennial generations during the pandemic, leaving them longing for another kind of social and emotional refuge.

"Amid the loneliness and disconnection and confusing sexual politics, romance — a genre that honored big feelings and crying jags and a nice, soft world where people were free to be corny and earnest and direct — became a balm. Once denigrated as a guilty pleasure for the desperate, horny housewife, to Gen-Zers, romance wasn't embarrassing at all. In fact, they loved it," Davis continued. It's true that the romance novel, once confined to the free time women had when they weren't scrubbing floors, was a guilty, escapist pleasure for women as recently as 20 years ago. Perhaps in our day and age, romance isn't necessarily *more* popular, but just less denigrated. Or perhaps it's the "dating pool." Far more shallow, pornified, and leaning right. So chick lit prevails!

You might be wondering what place romance novels have in a book about feminism.

"For a long time, romance novels sort of had a bad reputation," said Northeastern professor Cara Messina, who specializes in feminism, writing, and fan studies. "Reading them was shameful. The act of doing something that is viewed as shameful is an act of subversion." And just as modern women have reclaimed domestic duties with the cottagecore movement, we are also reclaiming our right to read the stories that give us joy—even if they have a "bad reputation." Messina continued: "This embrace of the romance community is not just about books. In a way, it's an act of feminism. It's about claiming a space that women enjoy that was made by and for women, a reminder that literature can be for everyone and anyone."

These stories also played a deeper role in helping women become liberated over 50 years ago. The genre of romance/female sexuality helped spark the sexual revolution of the 1970s, when Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* and Judy Blume's *Wifey* made splashy headlines in the newspapers for their explicit scenes. These books, along with the previously mentioned *Feminine Mystique* and *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, helped women see the quest for meaningful, equal love and romance as a worthwhile goal. So while many may scoff at current romance books as "trash," in 50 years we may view some of them as important landmarks in the trajectory of feminism.

Just as books have helped women escape for so long, romance novels and BookTok are the new edition of this, and Henry is playing the lead role. Her characters have been described by many as the white American "everywoman," someone who shops at Macy's and Trader Joe's, makes less than $100k, and listens to Taylor Swift. They're not unattainable, but they have just the right level of "bouginess" to warrant a fun escape. They do often make questionable decisions, which some would argue make them more likable (for example, in Henry's 2023 novel *Happy*

Place, the main character has enough disposable income to quit medical school and become a sculptor).

There's also something to be said about the way Henry writes her male characters: usually, they are the ideal, well-rounded, emotionally intelligent partners most women want.

Reading about these types of men restores faith in men for many women in a Trump/Musk/post-MeToo landscape. "To be described as a man written by a woman means to be created in the female gaze. Henry creates male characters with sincerity like no other. Differing from the male gaze, the female gaze centers its male protagonists in vulnerability with the absence of violence and toxic masculinity," Natalie Pineda wrote for HerCampus. "The male love interests, while they are their own person, exist alongside the female protagonist, not threatened by their own personhood; they are comfortable in their own masculinity and not afraid of femininity." One reason I think Henry's books have become so popular is that they feature, for the most part, emotionally well-rounded men, and reading about them can be another form of escape or fantasy. Our search for validation continues in our taste in literature. This is true with the plethora of hockey romances as well. Even though it seems like a frivolous trend, the typical male romantic lead in a hockey romance is staunchly devoted, emotionally intelligent, and often well-read, while simultaneously being a muscular Adonis. It's safe to say that we want a contradiction as well: we want to see traditional masculinity balanced with emotional intelligence and devotion, which is a rare currency these days. We want to see men fight and cry. This is often unlikely under patriarchy, where men are often boxed into "weak" or "strong" types, not allowed to embrace contradiction. When you're "strong," you often push down your emotions so much that they start to dull. When you're labeled "weak," you're unable to have access to the kind

of high-status man these books often center on. Our society as a whole has trouble with paradox, but we're especially firm with it when it comes to gender. The sheer quantity of these romances—whether hockey-centered, emotionally intelligent, or literary—goes to show the demand for the kind of man patriarchy tries to destroy.

Because our evolutionary instincts don't go away during a "political apocalypse," perhaps a scientific perspective will aid this. In evolutionary biology, a female is primed to balance two hypotheses. The "Good Genes" hypothesis says that women look for male traits that are expensive to develop, such as muscularity, which we see in many typical female fantasies within the romance genre. The "Good Investment" hypothesis suggests that women look for traits that indicate a man's capacity and willingness to provide for them and their children. This includes emotional intelligence, care, and devotion. Science suggests that the female brain, in heterosexual relationships, is biologically wired to search for those two traits. This is why nearly every romance novel love interest has these overlapping qualities. But here's the part that might surprise you: studies also suggest that females tend to choose good investments over good genes in long-term partnerships, as emotional intelligence is possibly the most important and alluring quality a man can have. But knowing this would be a disservice to the patriarchy. The patriarchy once again prevents exactly what most women want. Most feminists view biology as something to fight against. I actually think that we can use biology itself to fight patriarchy and prove that there is nothing inherent stating our inequality, and in fact that biology does not support the man the modern world cultivates. We can pick and choose our science when it comes to proving gender roles, but I think you have to see the full picture. It would be a disservice not to include science when I'm including every

other discipline—but it's also a disservice to people to treat us as only animals. I think that once again, you must take both. And in this case, both sides refer to emotional intelligence that most men lack.

We want to be adored. And really, you might be thinking, *men*, it's not that hard to love someone—but try loving someone with portable sex in your pocket 24/7!

The romantic recession has also allowed pop culture and the collective American consciousness to become more acquainted with modern queer life. When hetero romance is—let's face it—subpar, in the 2020s, we make space for shows like Heated Rivalry. For artists like Chappell Roan. For an acknowledgment of the true spectrum of sexuality. It seems that, at the exact moment that queer rights are being rolled back, we're having a collective coming-of-age about what love actually is. That's not disconnected from politics; it's intertwined with it. What if the "recession" isn't defined by those sad statistics about how we're "not having sex," and is instead a sign that non-heterosexual dynamics are being explored, that women are exploring themselves at the exact time the government wants the opposite? We want to own our bodies, and we are reaching for our desires and listening to our bodily instincts. Even if those books and fantasies fit traditional patriarchal norms, it's so much better to own what you want than to be forced into something you don't.

Men go to porn and women go to romance novels—is anything not a performance? Not an industry? Love, even in "anti-capitalist" circles, becomes capitalist. It's about who's on the market, who you can pick from the database (dating apps!), and if you don't have options, how you can simulate love by buying things. But unlike many Gen Z men, we're not just buying things; we're building things—opinions, frameworks, ways of viewing the world. Romance isn't just an escape; it's a radical

revisioning of what our lives could be.

What a lot of hetero women once took for granted—having nice men interested in dating them, having romance feel good—has become a domain with 100 billion views.

In some ways, reading is a performance, too. A woman reading a book is a marker of class, even if you can find them in libraries or schools or buy a $10 paperback. It signals a woman who knows what she's doing, her every move carefully calibrated. This effect is the same even while reading the ever-reviled romance genre—she knows what she's doing. That's a statement in a world that hates women. What cultural critic Mina Le calls the "hotgirlification of reading" is nothing new: the very concept reminds me of a scene in the 1953 film *How to Marry a Millionaire*, in which Marilyn Monroe sits on a plane (in a silk scarf and hat) pretending to read a book, which she doesn't know is placed upside down. In the film, what is a comedic moment now looks like the first remnants of this trend. Monroe, in this film, dismissed as another passing ditzy blonde, is now seen as an incredible comedic actress and one of the most recognizable faces in America, due to her canonization by Andy Warhol. Her story has been adapted into many "artsy" films, just as the romance/women's novels of the 70s are now seen as literature, though they weren't at the time. We don't realize how important what women are doing is until after the fact, when our legacy is cemented. Culture hates us until they get to call us nostalgia.

In romance novels, we trust. We find it all: fantasy, romantic replacement, and a hint of status and chicness. It almost makes you forget that nearly half of Gen Z adults are virgins!

So yes, let's talk about the statistics: the steady rattle of articles and opinion pieces and discussions all over about how screens are ruining our desire for connection and how we can't even talk to people anymore, let alone have sex, etc. While it's

true that the internet changed our romantic reality, that's not the full picture. The full picture is that, well…a lot of us have decided it's not worth it anymore.

To say it's a dysfunction on our part is invoking hysteria, blaming the woman for a phenomenon society caused. We have fulfilling friendships, so we're not socially behind in most ways. Why would it be so different for romantic relationships? Most of that is the same social skill. The problem isn't us; the problem is the dynamics, people, and expectations we encounter, which are impossible. It's a choice we're making, not a hysterical "romantic imbalance."

Romance is a lot of work, a lot of pandering to the male gaze, especially in the era of porn. It's uncomfortable to talk about for a lot of women: the amount of work we do just to be seen at a baseline level of "acceptableness." Pluck, shave, and wax every surface—the bare minimum, of course —and it costs what many people make in 2 whole weeks of work. Then you must be endlessly available, emotionally and physically. You're told not to care about how you look, but also to look perfect, which makes most intimate interactions feel like a judgmental exchange rather than…intimacy? Our pleasure isn't prioritized; we're told to fake it; we don't have emotional or financial support; there's no commitment in sight; and we're supposed to like it? Jane Austen would've recoiled.

Then, after that, there's the feeling that you are expected not to be a person in dating. Dull down your physical needs, emotional needs, and opinions. It's almost as if you are supposed to lose consciousness to be desirable. There is, a lot of times, a worry that even the smallest "mistake" will render a girl completely humiliated in front of everyone, because intimacy is so public these days. You are constantly thinking about

how to make yourself an object without realizing that's what you're doing. So eventually, the idea of losing consciousness and becoming an object starts to become much less appealing, and the idea of literature, which is literally expanding consciousness, starts to appeal to you much more. Romance novels don't require anything from you except your attention. A book takes you as you are, absolutely no judgment required. That's how romance should be. And dating should not be a roofie simulation. But with increased objectification and degradation, it's starting to feel like it. Of course, many brave, more unconventional women push rigidly against these boxes they are forced into. But this refusal and pushing require far more energy than most people have during an economic, political, and social crisis.

It's also starting to feel like most Gen Z heterosexual relationships fall into two boxes of performance for the woman: either succumbing to the pornified, often submissive, put-together image of a woman we see so often, which requires work and pushing down your own feelings. Or you stay true to your "true self" and prepare to be ridiculed, because relationships in the digital age are often a very public spectacle. Either way, you are not being accepted for who you are. This isn't true for all relationships, but it is a very real choice that Gen Z women calculate: to be or not to be (real).

The 2020s are one of the most economically precarious periods in recent American history. Women have trouble paying their rent, let alone staring at themselves to make sure there's not a stray hair or lipstick-ed teeth, and performing emotional labor as usual. So at the end of the exhausting day, you'd rather cozy up with Beverly Jenkins or Ali Hazelwood than dare step into the psychological landmine that is any dating app. So there you have it! The answer to your statistics is: people who aren't young in this day and age, who have already "settled down," are judging

a completely different landscape, and once again, blaming the women for the "issue." If it's even an issue.

The great part about all of this, the romantic recession, is that it means we can turn to each other (and of course, to the stacks). Gen Z women are increasingly prioritizing female (or rather, non-hetero male) friendship as our primary emotional support system. The "main plot" of our story is often our best friend or the exhilaration of having a friend group that completely understands us. By comparison, in a Gallup News poll, 25% of US men aged 15 to 34 said they "felt lonely a lot of the previous day."

It's honestly the best form of patriarchal revenge—we write our dream romance, talk about it with each other, while the men we're "supposed" to be dating are hung up on patriarchal digital fantasy. We're the ones who are truly living. That's not rejection; it's evolution. Who knows what will come of it? (I can hope that men will start dressing like Jane Austen characters and being "gentlemen" is the next trend, but I have a feeling it's not.)

I'm still in Barnes & Noble, picking up Sense & Sensibility, the gold spine I'd seen in a BookTok video. There is not a single man here, just the little alcove of books we're building to shield ourselves from the world. Just the one thing we've always owned: our thoughts, our desires, what it means to *want*. (It's also the fifteenth time I've heard someone order a frappuccino…)

All I know is that it's fun to construct your own dreams. We deserve that, after thousands of years of having them stifled by patriarchy. It doesn't matter if your dreams include pink dresses, people of different genders, or hockey players (although I do find those hockey romances overhyped). The point is that we're finally allowed to dream. And that's what is threatening men and threatening institutions. Not the girliness—the dreams. We turned our favorite "frivolous" genre into a realm that essentially revived the publishing industry, all by just writing down

what we actually wanted. The Gen Z girl's search for romantic "alchemy" became actual alchemy: we turned our fantasies about labs and hockey and the wild west and people of all ethnicities and genders truly loving one another into an outlet, a new way of seeing the world. It's not "girly" to romanticize things; it's what you do to survive.

Chapter 7: Jesus with a Microphone
or: Podcasts Are Why Men & Women Hate Each Other

❦

When Trump went on Joe Rogan, Kamala went on Call Her Daddy.

Long before Harris's guest appearance, *Call Her Daddy* began in 2018 with one premise: allowing women to open up about their sexual feelings and preferences and to have a free place for sexual expression. Originally hosted by Alex Cooper and Sofia Franklyn, the podcast aimed to give "locker room talk" to women: frank advice and personal experiences shared in a way previously reserved for men. Call Her Daddy was seen by many as a "feminist breakthrough," although you'll hear my complex thoughts on that later. The show is currently the second-most-popular podcast on Spotify—second only to…Joe Rogan.

The 2024 U.S. presidential race felt like far more than an election: it felt like a commentary on the state of gender in our society. In hindsight, every update, every campaign move, and each funny SNL skit was a reminder that, despite how far it feels like we have come, a woman still can't be president.

Both presidential candidates' carefully planned podcast appearances represent not only the gender dynamics of our era but also the prevalence and reach of podcasts. With that, each woman's fight to be heard, literally and figuratively.

Young women are increasingly turning left due to reproductive rights, and many young men are turning right due to the manosphere. This is the divide, and it's absolutely everywhere. It's in the way we talk and the podcasts we listen to. As males and females split further and further apart, the words we use and the platforms we endorse become stark reminders of the most extreme sides of gender politics in the 2020s.

You can't understand modern podcasting without Joe Rogan. He's the antagonist to Gen Z women, essentially: his group of conservative-leaning young men, engaging in rhetoric termed the "manosphere," are the opposite of everything modern feminism stands for. And you can't understand why we fight so hard for our rights without understanding misinformed misogyny, the explosion of anti-feminist podcasters, and their ideas of "reclaiming masculinity." Joe Rogan and his Gen Z male followers are doing the opposite of what Gen Z women are doing—attacking diverse femininity instead of reclaiming it. But in a sense, they are reaching for a similar impulse. In times of socioeconomic and political stress, we reach for what we know. For us, that's baking, Chappell Roan, Jane Austen– everything this book is deconstructing and analyzing. For them, it's manliness. Male domination. Gender essentialism. And for these young men, Joe Rogan is akin to Jesus with a microphone—the podium from which young male ideas about women, gender, sex, and society broadcast their truths.

Just as it's tricky to define femininity, masculinity is similarly perplexing. Most people have images that come to mind rather than words: carved chests, chiseled features, trucks, video games, guns, hunting, lack of free emotion, sexual dominance, and financial security. These concepts and images seem so disparate when you think about them separately, but each image and standard provides the blueprint of the American male

today. While standards for women have been deconstructed, analyzed, and rebuked in many circles, standards for American men haven't received nearly as much attention or as much scrutiny. Manosphere creators bill themselves and their values as "natural," much like tradwives talk about traditional roles in the home. But for content from male creators, it seems to be easier to take the bait—at least for young men. After all, their "ideal" has not been rebuked by hundreds of women's studies departments and bestselling books. There has been little research, but not enough for modern men to see this "dominance" trend as a red flag.

Feminism and Women's/Gender Studies, as bona fide fields, have been accepted in academia for only 50 years. Men in the past few generations have learned completely new standards and concepts of masculinity, both through culture and through academia—but still, the "male feminist" is code for "educated man." There is no way to erase class in the debate of toxic male vs. male feminist—Joe Rogan resonates with Gen Z men widely because his conversations and opinions could theoretically appeal to every American male. He adamantly refuses to give himself a political label and therefore gets to share his unique stance on each issue. For many men, his podcast *is* education.

He is therefore able to toy with conservative values while maintaining his audience. He can call the #MeToo movement a "witch hunt" and say that "trans people will lead to societal collapse" *and* somehow maintain his "apolitical" status. His stances on issues—especially when it comes to gender—echo out into thought patterns, societal discourse, and many, many Reddit pages. He is a thought leader who refuses to label himself. And yet he speaks of American men, "the top of the food chain," and their struggles as if they are completely void of political leaning. This is false. Podcasts and politics are profoundly linked. And

right now, in American culture, the vast majority of the conversation is split down the middle.

"The gender gap between men and women has been a durable fact of life in American politics — and nowhere is this gap larger than among the youngest cohort of American adults, Gen Z," Stephanie Perry, of the Penn Program on Opinion Research and Election Studies, told NBC in 2025. "Gen Z men who voted for Trump rate having children as the most important thing in their personal definition of success. Gen Z women who voted for Harris ranked having children as the second-least important thing in their personal definition of success." The gender divide during the 2024 election was undeniable: intellectually, politically, socially. I've spent a lot of time discussing the values and influences of Gen Z women, but what about our counterparts? How do Gen Z men and their political opinions affect us?

Just as Rogan became a symbol of "ideal" American masculinity, Trump has done the same. While women have support groups, feminist movements, and widespread knowledge of how society affects our lives, men of the same age feel "left behind." "Culturally, no one's looking out for them," said Daniel A. Cox, director of the Survey Center on American Life, who writes about the Gen Z political gender gap. "They're drawn to his message, his persona, the unapologetic machismo he tries to exude." Trump's optimistic naivete and his unapologetic masculinity and dominance speak to young men who feel underappreciated. Trump's ethos says: I see you for the man that you are. Masculinity is valuable. Let's bring it back. And in an age of #MeToo, economic insecurity, and widespread youth mental health crisis, retreating to John Wayne macho masculinity is satisfying, full-circle—it's a way of fighting back—a way of fighting for a more sustainable existence. For us, that existence includes equality. For them, it's about being valued, not pushed

aside. Needed, not ignored. In a sense, it's the same thing we're fighting for. We're more alike than we think.

Men from Generation Z are more likely than older baby boomers to believe that feminism has done more harm than good. This is according to research from King's College London that shows a "real risk of fractious division among this coming generation." Boomers, the American men who grew up in the I Love Lucy housewife era, when women could not have their own credit cards, believe in feminism more than young men today. This is why we're fractured.

In some ways, feminism has backfired—what was originally a movement for equal rights between the sexes came off to men as "female chauvinism," leading them to fight against it, therefore perpetuating the vicious cycle further. Podcasts are the one retreat where this feeling of cultural and political ambush against "traditional masculinity" is deconstructed in a way that makes sense to younger generations of men. This rhetoric is horrifying, especially when it comes to content from creators like Andrew Tate, the "king of toxic masculinity," who believes that women (or "females," as he likes to say) are "male property" and should "take" domestic abuse and sexual violence. Tate is the end of the spectrum when it comes to outwardly atrocious misogynistic philosophies, and yet he still has a hugely devoted audience of millions. That says more about American men than anyone wants to admit.

In Orwell's 1984, voices are the ultimate tools of power and control over the public. Syme explains that the Party will eliminate thoughtcrime by rendering the words needed for rebellion impossible. "Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end, we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it," he says. The Trump administra-

tion is systematically removing and limiting words to describe the LGBTQ+ community, mental health, diversity, climate, and public health. Trump going on Joe Rogan shows he knows the absolute power of the spoken word —the voice—and this means that podcasts are not a frivolous matter in the American zeitgeist, but rather the true medium through which it is now perpetuated. Just as Newsspeak deletes words from language, Joe Rogan refuses to define his stance, and Trump deletes entire fields of study. Podcasts exhibit ways of speaking that intentionally avoid certain words. While Rogan's three-hour episodes seem unfiltered, they are powerful examples of how to think and behave. Words are not just words; they are powerful tools that can dismantle entire ways of thinking, whether over three hours or with a simple, quiet deletion.

Podcasts act as a "third place" for Gen Z men, a place of "guidance" and "truth" in an uncertain secular age where no one is quite sure what deserves credibility. Male-centric podcasts cover a wide range of topics and give men space to discuss important issues (sex, religion, addiction, society) as well as hobbies (sports, business, culture). Manosphere podcasters like Joe Rogan and Jordan Peterson dominate the airwaves, usurping for many men traditional avenues of meaning such as religious participation. That's not an overstatement: the velocity with which these creators shape the consciousness of America's youth is unparalleled. Despite all the rhetoric and wrong that many feel podcasts perpetuate, for these men, they are a conversational escape, a form of parasocial intimacy in a time when scripted, corporate, fake AI slop rules social media. Extremist views are increasingly popular because we live in an extremist state. Podcasts feel "real" for Gen Z; they seem to reflect our current political, social, and cultural reality. Amplifying anyone with a

message and a microphone is a risk to marginalized groups and to society as a whole. And authenticity is the golden ticket, even when it costs women everything.

While podcasts have technically been around since 2003, it wasn't until about 10 years later that Serial, widely considered the first real true-crime podcast, rose in popularity. The podcast followed the reopening of a 1990s murder case by journalist Sarah Koenig, examining conflicting testimonies, physical evidence, and call tracing to provide the general public with a binge-worthy investigation. This format allowed podcast listeners to take on the role of detectives, questioning different sides of the story and determining their own truth. When Serial became the most influential and fastest-growing podcast in history, it wasn't just a passing trend, but a signal from the social media age that the voices of the American public would finally be heard.

Serial launched the true crime podcast, but it also proved to the public that podcasts were a viable and marketable medium. Over the next five years, podcasting exploded. People all over the world started washing the dishes while listening to a murder mystery, a diet culture takedown, or a political news segment. Voices, everywhere, the inescapable sound of conversation. It was overwhelming. And it changed my generation forever.

If Serial was podcasting's genesis, this medium served a clear societal function: everything is up for questioning; nothing is safe, nothing is true, nothing is predetermined. Use your own mind, your own internal compass. Be the societal detective, scrounging for details that somehow amount to an elaborate conspiracy of ultimate importance. You, yes, you, need your voice heard. You are special. Everything must be decoded. The world hates you; now speak up about it. Life is not to be lived, it is to be ranted and obsessed over. The digital age turned social

dynamics and culture into a crime scene that we listen to every day.

This connects directly to the invention of an entirely new job category in the 21st century: the influencer, also known as "getting paid for main character syndrome." Over half of Gen Z want to be influencers. Even more revealing, they think they can "easily make a career" out of it. The reality is much less promising, as anyone who has posted a video on YouTube knows. Influencing, unless you are extraordinarily lucky or preternaturally dedicated, is a losing game. So is podcasting on some level. There are over 4 million podcasts, many of them inactive, but making a living from podcasting is nearly impossible with this kind of saturation.

And when anyone strikes gold with their podcast, hitting the top of the charts, they become a sort of "God-like" entity, almost an "older sister" to the digital world. Each popular podcast serves a distinct ideological purpose, becoming its own friend group, video game, and religion.

Call Her Daddy became the ultimate "women's podcast," teaching American women to decode their intimacy and "hold power" in their sexual pleasure. Even shows like this have Serial as a distant ancestor, in their self-importance, their ability to treat everything as a conversation, an opinion worthy of discussion and analysis.

Except: Call Her Daddy isn't a feminist show. It's not even a woman's show. Most women– women of color, queer women, low-income women, and fat women– are excluded from this fantasy. Call Her Daddy is what happens when you mix the tradwife ethos with porn culture. It's a shallow attempt at pandering to the male gaze, conflating sexual prowess with being powerful. Women deserve better. And it's the system's fault that

we don't have better.

This is what gets funded; this is what gets clicks. Not depth, not specificity. It's the opposite of authentic. It's performative authenticity. It's what happens when people conflate all sexual conversations to be synonymous with equality, suddenly. Being honest about sex is great, but it's the bare minimum with Call Her Daddy's audience. Never once does Alex Cooper interrogate the system that makes her feel like she must be obsessed with pleasing men. She can't, because her entire brand is built on this "fact," treated as truth. She is making millions of dollars from making women feel insecure.

The prime evidence for this is Cooper's 45-minute interview with Harry Jowsey, a contestant on the reality show Too Hot To Handle. Jowsey talks about his "girl" in the podcast without a name, joking about spitting in her mouth and holding her so she can't move. We never get a name — just "current girl." Just the positions, the specifics, his pleasure. But he's never bothered to share anything about the woman. "Current girl" sounds like a Barbie doll, devoid of personality. Interchangeable. Not human. His testimony is striking—amid giggling with Cooper about her overt interview questions, he says he was "mad at the gym" that day and told his "current girl" to "leave your door unlocked and when I come in you have to be naked." Cooper asks, "And does she like that?" He says, "Yeah," and there is no doubt in the conversation about this being true. Just a passing mention of dominance, anger, and using women as objects. Then Jowsey talks about how he refused to punch a woman in the face when she asked for it—more giggling from Cooper. She seemed surprised; he didn't.

Cooper doesn't analyze sex or treatment of women or the prioritization of male pleasure and domination. She giggles, laughs, and asks men repeatedly how they want women to look

and behave. This is commercial pseudo-feminism, lamely trying to appropriate feminism's true purpose for financial profit.

Podcasting played a vital role in the 2024 presidential election. When Trump's appearance on Joe Rogan became a smash with Gen Z men, Harris decided to bring her policies to podcasting as well. But the options were limited.

When the most popular women's podcast is a thin blonde, wealthy white woman telling her audience how to get better at pleasing men sexually, I get the sense that we're in the pornified 1950s. Harris went on Call Her Daddy, not because it's a political podcast, or particularly intellectual, or even particularly conservative. She went on Call Her Daddy because that's the "women's podcast." Her team decided that was how she could reach the widest audience of young American women. After all, there isn't a female Joe Rogan—a woman who can talk for three hours about politics and opinions and be unapologetically loud. The closest thing podcasting has to a female Joe Rogan is Alex Cooper of Call Her Daddy, who wants you to watch her ad with a sexy nurse costume: "Daddy's Got You Covered."

So the most famous female American politician, and at the time the Vice President of the United States, had her interview sandwiched between sex tips and celebrity gossip. Sadly, the top "women's podcasts" are either about trying to find the killers of dead women, how to please men during sex, or how to get the newest Kardashian leggings. "Women's podcasts" failed Harris. But it wasn't her fault. Our society rewards Cooper's behavior and the behavior of her male guests. Her male guests are the real smoking gun for me: Cooper spends an hour asking each of them about their sex tips, stories, their opinions on women… and when women come on, it's often promotional, and they're mostly white celebrities doing standard interviews. If this is a show about female pleasure and agency, why are men's opinions

and pleasure treated as the ultimate goal?

That's the thing: Call Her Daddy isn't about female agency. It's about clicks. It's about making the most popular women's podcast somehow devoid of most real women. It's a lie. It pushes the Madonna/whore complex in the guise of conversation. If you're sexual, you're shallow, not valuable, dumb. It perpetuates this binary we've lived with as women for centuries. Alex Cooper hosts a porn podcast and thinks it's feminism. I reject that entirely.

But what Call Her Daddy does do is normalize the way American women speak. It expresses our "likes," our uptalk, our self-doubt, our self-criticism. Every female guest exemplifies the modern female vernacular.

Growing up in California, I spent a lot of time around girls who "talk like girls." I can code-switch: from my Passover Seder self to my Turner Classic Movies self to my high school gym class self. And the version of me with my peers sounds a lot more like a "normal girl" is supposed to talk. Just as a normal person would, I mess this up a lot. It's hard to switch in and out of multiple ways of being, multiple selves. (This is called the subself in psychology and sociology, the idea that switching between personalities can fracture the "true self.")

When I started podcasting at age 10, I said "like" a lot. I said "um." My father, looking out for me, told me to minimize the use of the word 'like' in my speech. So I did. I did dozens of interviews, focused on not saying it, and now it's a habit, even in conversations with friends. But why does it seem less professional to 'talk like a girl' when that's how I built my career--from my female expertise? What's so wrong about "talking female?"

It's hard for me to write about this when I feel like a fraud in terms of the word "like." I think it sounds unprofessional; I find

it a filler word, and I get annoyed when it's used repeatedly. I have to question that and the programmed biases under it. But as everyone does, I cannot separate the word from the connotation: stupidity. Vapidity. It reminds me of the Pilates Princess, the perfect wellness girl trap I'm trying not to fall into every day. I want to be a serious writer. So I have to talk like one. Even when my identities are mixed. The term "teen girl author" isn't used very often.

They know you're a teen girl, but you have to prove yourself in the way you speak, your poise, and your expertise. Every word that comes out of your mouth is proof that you're not an impostor, that you're not taking the spotlight from someone more talented. I love getting complimented on my interviews, but I often feel as if the compliments are more about my composure than the ideas behind my words. Poise, beauty, confidence… these aren't exactly academic, classic-film-related words. It often feels like my expertise is conflated with my reality, my girlhood. It should be seen as a real problem that our word choice somehow matters so much (in the case of "like") and yet can matter so little (in the case of the content of my conversations).

I learned important vocabulary, I learned poise, and I learned "thinking things before I say them" so that people would, on the most human level, listen to what I had to say. If a boy showed up for these interviews, he could wear an undershirt and say "um" as much as he wanted, and it would still be remarkable that he was even there. He could be late to interviews and mean to journalists because the sheer gritty power of his genius would be enough. He could lie, he could charm, he could have public controversies and bounce back through talent alone. He could do exactly what I did with ten times less discipline and rigor and still be called a genius. How authentic, how charming, how passionate. When I show up in a dress with a full face of makeup,

having studied Merriam-Webster's dictionary and my thesaurus and written an academic book, I get "pretty" and "she was kind of interesting." Oh yes, as female prodigies, we underestimate the luxury of going without eyeliner, linguistic training, or five cups of coffee. It's also a special kind of luxury for male prodigies not to be consistently harassed, propositioned, or coerced. Along with being an artist, you also have to learn to be prey.

The worst part of this to me is that, to gain this kind of respect and authority in my writing, I sacrificed my relationships with other young women. Stopped talking like them. Stopped being "relatable," started being "intimidating." The friends I have can talk to me like I'm a professor. When you're a young girl, you choose: be normal, have friends, say "like," or, as I did, work hard, train yourself to speak like an academic, and fulfill your dreams.

When I have explained this dilemma to older women, they disagree with my "quabbling." My grandmother was rejected from a writing job in the 1960s for being engaged to my grandfather. She fought misogyny actively throughout her entire career. There are different degrees of patriarchal control. But trying your hardest just to be barely listened to is a struggle I face every day. That might not be worth burning bras over, but it's something to me.

I have trained myself out of talking like a girl. I think so many of us have. Who can blame us? To be taken seriously, you act like a man, talk like a man, dress like a man. You need the word "girl" in front of "boss." Because girls aren't innately powerful in our society, we have to "learn" it.

Girl math, girl dinner, tomato girl, clean girl, hot girl walk. So much slang with "girl." So much meaning is attached to a single descriptor.

Adding "girl" as a suffix to everything isn't shallow; it's an

escape hatch. Every group under attack has its own way of talking, its own way of distinguishing itself from the oppressor. Just like I have Jewish inside jokes with my family to protect us from traumatizing histories and political threats, women say "like," shorten words, and add "girl" to everything. But somehow, when *we* do it, it's not just a way of talking; it's shallow. It's a signifier of low intelligence. Maybe it's not our fault that society thinks being female makes you dumb. When you take away our rights to our own bodies, why *wouldn't* we talk about it?

In 2022, women on TikTok started asking the men in their lives how often they thought about the Roman Empire. Surprisingly, men thought about their "gladiator predecessors" almost daily. So "Roman Empire" became a stand-in for any recurring obsession. "New Journalism is my Roman Empire." "Sylvia Plath is my Roman Empire." (Alright, yes, those are just my personal ones.)

What IS our Roman Empire? The Roman Empire for girls—what we think about every day while brushing our teeth, driving, or doing homework —is hard to pin down. Was there never a point when we ruled the world, ever an historical era when we weren't under patriarchal control? Or maybe it's not that deep. Oh, and *deep*! A way of naming things that are almost too real in the authenticity drought. Back when I used to go to more social gatherings, I was always labeled the "deep one." I think it's because seeing things beyond little internet silos makes a lot of people feel small and uninformed.

As for our Roman Empire, maybe it's watching every Uber driver to make sure we're safe. Maybe it's trying to escape street harassment, trying to look pretty enough to make them take us seriously. Maybe our Roman Empire is just a constant threat to our existence. Maybe we think about Roe v. Wade every day. Maybe we think about our friends in the mental hospital every

day. Girls today are complicated because the web we live in is complex.

Isn't that awful for our psychology? Knowing most women before you were probably in danger of being raped, couldn't fulfill their dreams, and lived under constant threat? There's no era outside of the last 50 years (and even that's questionable) when we were truly safe and accepted. And if we were, we were pushing back against rigid confines, and that in itself was stressful. Scholars recognize this as Patriarchy Stress Disorder—but most people like to talk about the pressure to have a big dick instead! Because their last few years of "unachievable standards" are much more important than thousands of ours.

There isn't a single historical era we gravitate towards, perhaps because we're living through it right now. Where's the Gladiator film for women? When, in the history of patriarchal society, could women be valiant, strong, and powerful, in the last two thousand years, without being punished for it? Never. So we think about today instead.

And there are "pick me girls" too. The phrase is used for a woman who panders to male approval, which is really just a way to insult any woman who acts in a way that makes other people feel uncomfortable or doesn't act in the "right" way. She is labeled as a "pick me." "Pick me" as a phrase is really just about a basic desire to be seen, heard, and chosen, which every human has (although to varying degrees. All of us want to be "picked." We all have a status drive, that's what makes us human. But the fact that it's a way to insult a woman shows how we are supposed to be perfect without even trying. Any moment a girl tries or puts in any effort, she is in danger of wanting to be picked, which is bad. But also, if you don't try hard enough, what are you doing? Put in some effort. Everything is a catch-22. Women created the term "pick me" to address a real type: women who put down

other women to be cool, the girl who watches football and drinks beer in a bikini. The Gilmore Girl who can eat fifty burgers and fit into size 2 jeans. (Please, pop culture, read up on metabolisms sometime.)

And then the term hit back at every woman like a torpedo of judgment, and became the ultimate way to put down any version of femininity that isn't "comfortable." Do you like watching sports? Do you like dressing up? Do you try hard at anything? Pick me, pick me, pick me! So much slang was invented by women, and yet so much of it is used against us, against our will. And that's not our fault; it's a sign of a culture in crisis, one that fundamentally does not understand the meaning, tone, and purpose of words. We twist them to suit our values.

The antithesis of the "pick me" is the "girl's girl": the woman who supports other women, doesn't hold grudges, always has a spare tampon in her bag, and gives advice and hugs. The problem with this is that it's yet another version of compliance. It doesn't appear to be on the outside, but when you strip it of its gendered notions, the "girl's girl" is just women being subservient all over again, to each other. It strips us of our individuality, telling us to agree with all other women, all the time, until the end of time, when that was never asked of any other group. There's a difference between solidarity and agreeing with anything a woman says. There's a difference between helping other women and feeling like you have to. And the fact that we are even thinking about this, while Rogan is having 3-hour publicized fights with his bros, is emblematic of the exact cage we are trying to escape. Just like the diet culture and male gaze parasites feeding off our insides, these small control tactics do, too; they have eyes, and they are always making sure you know you're being perceived.

Linguistics and creating our own words to suit our experience

can backfire, too. When this comes out, I'll inevitably get slotted into the "girl's girl" or "pick me" category, told if I'm "hot or not," and categorized into whatever neat box they want to put a teen girl into. And that's not my fault. In fact, they've proven my point exactly.

"Sick" and "awesome" are the same, just like "I'm dead" and "I really loved that" are the same. Exaggeration and irony are key in the Gen Z slang game. There's "gaslight, gatekeep, girlboss," the takedown of hustle culture and 2010s feminism in three words. Attacking the hollow exclusivity of "trying hard" and the impossibility of winning against the patriarchy by simply smiling. Slang has everything. "Delulu" as a way of admitting our insanity. "Ick" is the inexplicable feeling of revulsion, often either towards scrambled eggs or a long-term boyfriend. *God*, I love words. They're the way the gender gap is most clearly articulated, since the way we weaponize words and even disciplines are so starkly different.

Alex Cooper rebranded "Call Her Daddy" around 2023. She aimed for a more "mature and measured" tone, discussing her mental health struggles and her changing feminist views. But she was still asking her female guests to compare their ex-boyfriends' bedroom skills. And still, she talked to Hailey Bieber for 30 minutes about her husband's ex. The rebrand tried to mature a voice that was happiest talking about sex toys. So when Kamala Harris appeared on the podcast, opinions were divided. No questions about Harris's sex life (thank God), but the interview tried to brand Harris as the girl-next-door, a girl-to-girl conversation about reproductive rights that was really a transaction. Harris wanted to spread her message on the airwaves to young women. Cooper wanted to expand her brand beyond sex tips. It

didn't exactly work for either of them. The Cut called Cooper's interviews "rarely hard-hitting." Since the episode wasn't a brash 3-hour debate on specific policies (as Rogan often provides), it didn't provide the push Harris's campaign needed. You would think that, in our supposedly advanced age, a woman could win the presidency. But the way we talk and the way female politicians are portrayed in the media stand in our way.

And what if it's not our fault that the glass ceiling hasn't been broken? Male politicians can be people, allowed grace, allowed ego, while women are flattened into one-note, shrill, caricature "propagandists." Our media system and society as a whole are set up to disregard women for existing. Too emotional? Too sterile? Too shrill? Too deep-voiced? Everything is a bullet that comes back to shoot down women for daring to have ideas.

Dramatic, shrill, bossy, calculated, strident, bitchy, confessional, slutty. Words that only apply to women. Criticisms that only apply to women. From the manosphere to the Roman Empire, every word we use and hear reflects the widening gap between young men and women. We both turn to different outlets and beliefs to deal with systemic failures. The system we live and work in is so obviously rigged that no one seems to see it anymore—so we have to begin and end with words. The way people talk, and what that says about us.

Harris's Call Her Daddy interview was, in part, a way to address the campaign's critics. Harris was not a mother, so she couldn't possibly be fit to be president! But if she were a mother, she wouldn't be fit for the presidency either (a working mother??). Harris was too strong-willed in her critique of Trump, so she must hate all men. Every word that came out of her mouth was proof she wasn't fit for her position, so she trained herself to be the most qualified candidate possible, with the best ideas and policies and SNL sketches, and that still didn't

work. That's not because women aren't good enough. It's because America hates women. Hillary Clinton was called shrill. Her voice was annoying, opinionated, and not womanly enough. The qualities that make a professional—being strong-willed, confident in your values, and a good speaker —don't make America's "perfect woman." So even in 2024, we can't win.

Chapter 8: Inside the Psych Ward
or: A Tour Through Gen Z's Societal Psychosis

"The turned-down pages of my life were turned up, and the past was present."

—Nellie Bly, Ten Days in a Mad-House

At this point, I'm officially crazy.

I'm sitting in the adolescent mental health ward in Berkeley, California. The clock reads 3 am, and the harsh lights in this unfamiliar room are blinding me. A woman who works there is asking me to sign a waiver: I have been put on a 5150, which she describes as an "involuntary 72-hour psychiatric hold," and I can't buy a firearm in the next five years (which admittedly doesn't bother me at all). Images of a gun are the last thing I want right now: they've taken my belongings and clothes, and checked my body for scarring. When they finally bring me to a small bed in a dark room, I ask myself, "*How did I get here?*"

You can look at this porcelain, at these tiny, perfect dolls we are supposed to be, without even realizing we're broken.

The hospital is full of girls– girls of varied personalities and cultures, with all kinds of different stories. They are girls who cut themselves, girls who hear things, girls like me who have

OCD. When a boy is admitted to this place, he is easily noticed as an outlier—that's how skewed the ratio is.

This place is awful, reminiscent of portrayals of such places I'd read about in books such as Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted*, and Elizabeth Wurtzel's *Prozac Nation*. One thing's for sure: the way it was initially described to me ("a calming place where you'll meet a bunch of other teens and read books") was drastically inaccurate.

An unfamiliar, jarring buzz fills my ears as I try to fall asleep. I think about how many young women, just like me, have been locked up in this place. In my dreams, I'm banging on doors, screaming like an animal, tears running down my entire body.

I won't lie: my thoughts at this point veered towards the dramatic side. But when you're in a new, scary place that looks like a jail, and nurses and doctors are forgetting your pills and your name left and right, it's second nature to think that way. The medical establishment treats mental patients as if they are something other than human, less deserving of respect, more like animals than people. I felt like an object—and it wasn't the first time.

But the mental hospital was the first time I met a wide spectrum of girls from very different backgrounds, and bonded with all of them because of something achingly human. Paloma had overdosed on her pills multiple times. She was from a low-income family living hours away. I still bonded with her tightly. Hazel was wheeled into the ward still wearing dark liquid eyeliner and a punk band t-shirt. I was nothing like her. And I loved her. I loved all of them.

Then there was Malia. She'd lie in bed all day doing crossword puzzles, refusing to eat or drink water. I'd come in after hours of group therapy and activities, and she'd still be there. I

pleaded with her: *Please join us! Please try to heal with us! Try to get better, for me if no one else.* She didn't. So I just spent more time in my room. There were phone numbers on the walls. We called them. One girl answered, saying she'd been to that hospital 5 times in a row. She survived. It surprised us. The place really did seem like an asylum with no escape. The day I left, I didn't say goodbye to Malia because I was so excited to leave, I couldn't wait to see a tree again. I couldn't wait to smell fresh air, to walk, to do the things I needed to heal. I still regret not saying goodbye to this day.

I remember waking up months later, thinking of Malia, reminding myself of the conversation with her psychiatrist in our room: *We could send you to residential treatment.* She seemed excited, hopeful. That made me ecstatic. She was there when my Haldol medication caused a temporary extreme restlessness called akathisia. I couldn't stop pacing around the room. She called the nurse. He thought I was there for an eating disorder, and he told me to stop exercising. It wasn't allowed. I also wasn't allowed to leave the table for about an hour after eating. They thought I would throw up in the toilet. I had no history of an eating disorder, but when I tried to tell them, they didn't believe me. I sat with the other girls at the table, wishing I could go back to my room and read my Virginia Woolf, which I had borrowed from the tiny library and schoolroom. "You're so smart, and you read so many books" meant nothing to me as a compliment at the time, when I was writing suicide notes on legal pads, scribbling out screenplays about my family's trauma, and thought I would die before thirteen. I made my family print out pictures of Audrey Hepburn so I could have a face I recognized to look at when I was sitting alone in my room. Since then, every birthday has felt like a reminder of the day I woke up at age thirteen in a psych ward. Every birthday still feels both like an

ominous ticking clock and a profound gratitude that I'm here at all. Institutionalization taught me to take things seriously, but it also taught me to laugh at practically everything, because you never know when it can be gone. You never know when you can lose track of yourself and fall into a ravine, your consciousness taken, a sluggish depressive nightmare.

Every moment, I was seconds away from losing myself, walking a tightrope that everyone was watching. I take the luxury of having a unified self at all so profoundly seriously. Many people without mental illness don't understand how your perspectives warp every day, the way the drugs you take to stay alive permanently change your brain, the balancing act of appearing sane at all. The whole time, begging, please don't let me fall. The rashes from antiseizure medications, the IV puncture wounds, the days-long sedation. The physical toll it takes on a body is more than anyone sane can ever grasp. People asked me why I got published so early. In large part, it's because I thought I didn't have much time left.

Occasionally, a girl would be in her room alone, and the nurses would all gather around the entrance outside her door. Even the girls without anxiety disorders got anxious. They wouldn't tell us what happened. Usually, it was a self-harm incident. The girl would be locked in her room for 24 hours, essentially in solitary confinement. One time, a girl with depression came in and was sick. They tested her for COVID, and when she came up positive, they quarantined her in her room for 2 weeks with no support from psychiatrists or providers. Her door was taped up. Prison?

Another friend later told me that it was one of the best wards she'd ever been to. I shudder to think of the carceral, Blackwell's Island-adjacent asylums she was comparing it to. I want people to know that every single day, behind closed doors and locked

gates, girls are being sedated out of their minds, put on a new antipsychotic every week, electroshocked, put into confinement, blamed and surveilled, often for problems the institution and society perpetuated. They made me strip naked at three in the morning to make sure I wasn't hiding drugs inside my body. They took my blood in the early hours of the morning, barely asking me, still sedated from the pills they gave me. They watched my friends shower. They injected my friends with Haldol because they were upset. They lied to me about what my medications were actually doing, about when I would get out, about what it would actually be like. They subjected me to infernal nightmares for years later, when I begged never to go back, subsisting on willpower alone. Each day in the ward, you are in a liminal state of sobbing and sedation, fatalism and the tiniest glimmers of hope. I was effectively brain-dead, feeling like a prisoner at 12 years old. Due to all the drugs I was on, my memory of that time feels numb, smooth as a padded cell. They wanted me to forget. They took a portion of my childhood, and I'm supposed to be silent about it.

It's still happening—they don't call us hysterical anymore, they just ignore us, and it kills us anyway. You don't see it because they don't want you to. But it's happening, and it's invisible, and every woman who has ever set foot in the ward knows, privately, secretly, that what we've been through is akin to the worst experience a person can have. It's secular America's hell, and it's preteen and adolescent girls who are put in this dungeon.

Ava was only a year older, but she loved me like a sister. We did pranks and art projects together. She went into psychosis. We were children. Her psychiatrist said they might try electroshock therapy on a fourteen-year-old. I think of her all the time and pray. I do that for every single one of them. And I realize that

I'm the odd one out. I'm the exception. I'm the girl who lived to tell. And that kills me.

Some of us contacted each other after we left, although it was not allowed. We were supposed to wait six months before contact. That's forever in teenager time. Only with hindsight do I understand that the reason they give us that benchmark is so that we won't speak out to each other about the abuse. It was ostensibly for privacy reasons, but I knew the truth. They wanted to silence us.

I listened to stories about overdoses, rape, trauma, conversion therapy, and profound isolation. I heard and held all of it at 12 years old. The ward is hell, but it's also a conference of everything driving us mad. There were so many different facets of girls' experiences: Trans, Black, Jewish, Iranian, queer, every possible position and cultural programming led us to the same place. Already vulnerable, we were harmed in different ways, at different extremes. It was an awakening for all of us, brought about by our solidarity. Outside the ward, cultures were split, arguments lost and won, and politics divided. We were just fighting for our lives together.

The truth is, the psych ward awakened me to the patriarchy. It was more powerful than any other category or boundary . . . psychiatric girlhood. Everything collapsed until it was only girl-to-girl at the end of the world. The campfire burning on Lithium. Mean Girls, rap, and classic movies on television. I was a preteen girl with a blood draw I didn't want and a new medication each week for a psychosis I didn't have. Before the psych ward, I was perhaps less obsessed with the effects of popular culture. But once I realized that every single one of us in that facility was trading Nirvana tracks, debating Netflix films, sharing their own music, favorite television shows, and confessing to weird social media posts and trends, I realized that culture wasn't just a

frivolous side hustle for my generation, but a domain we cannot escape that both keeps us alive and kills us.

These girls were my lifeline. We held on to each other because we didn't have hope. Because we didn't have the help we needed, the right medications, the right environment, the right parents, the right life. But we had each other. It's not cliché, because it's true for every one of us. I owe my life to them.

According to the CDC, 20% of teens report seriously considering suicide in the past year, and 40% reported feelings of persistent sadness or hopelessness. The percentages are even greater when narrowed to teen girls: in 2021, nearly 3 in 5 US teen girls reported feeling persistently hopeless. This is double that of boys, and the highest level reported over the past decade.

Along with this, according to the NIH, the suicidal ideation rate among teen girls is 22%, once again nearly double that of boys (12%), and 9.3% of us attempt suicide each year. I won't rattle off any more stark statistics—I think I've made my point—but I think we all know that these rates of mental health issues are not normal. They originate from an excess of unique stresses that teens, and more specifically girls, in my age bracket face. I've spent these chapters discussing various stressors related to specific topics: societal expectations, social media, the pandemic, and social isolation.

Instead of immediately explaining exactly what's going on with teen girls' mental health crisis today, I encourage you to think of the ways, directly or indirectly, it has affected you. I think we've all seen the effects of this mental health crisis in our communities, whether we realize it or not. Whether you're a teen girl who struggles herself (I'm with you) or a supportive friend, parent, or mentor, over the past years we all, to some extent, have seen the devastating effects of this.

The more I consider it carefully, the more I see the depression

and anxiety in my Gen Z friends, relatives, and peers. Most of us struggle with it in some form or another, whether we admit it or not (and many of us do). It was hard for me to realize at first because this is simply how it's always been for me. As someone who has struggled with OCD and a mood disorder since I was 6 years old, I assumed that fighting this amount of anxiety and agony was "normal." And when I saw my friends talking about it, that further reinforced this idea that mental health issues are, and always have been, extremely common. We'll get to the exact statistics later, but the more I research it, the more it seems like a crisis unique to my generation.

This chapter is a break from my examination of pop culture and pink to examine the Modern Cage, the mental illness that lies under our generation like a dark blanket, an undertone to everything we know.

Jonathan Haidt's book "The Anxious Generation" is a cornerstone for understanding the topics I'll discuss in this chapter. The bestseller, which remained on the New York Times nonfiction list for 50+ consecutive weeks, argues that Gen Z became riddled with mental illness for two primary reasons: our overprotection in the physical world and our underprotection in the digital world. "The two big mistakes we've made [are] overprotecting children in the real world (where they need to learn from vast amounts of direct experience) and underprotecting them online (where they are particularly vulnerable during puberty)," Haidt wrote. I find his theory compelling because it so closely aligns with what I've seen demonstrated in my life and my peers' lives.

Gen Z girls, especially in more privileged circumstances, are stifled and overprotected when it comes to our decisions and the experiences we get to have in the real world (a byproduct of the fashionable "helicopter parenting"). Despite all the real-

world buffering, many of us feel overwhelmed and unequipped to handle the vast, opinionated, and often vicious corners of the internet. The misfiring of the digital world and social media is, no doubt, significantly contributing to our poor mental health. But instead of focusing on depressing statistics or further digging myself into the pessimistic rabbit hole (which I've done way too many times), I want to discuss how our commonality lies in the mental health struggles we face and how we express ourselves around them. As you'll see throughout this chapter, so much of our culture, as a generation of girls, is wrapped up in this collective battle against anxiety, depression, comparison, and loneliness. It's something we've turned into art, activism, and conversation—and it's also, as we'll learn, tied up in the meaning of being a girl, not only now, but also in the past.

It is no coincidence that nearly twice as many girls are struggling with severe mental illness as boys. There's no one reason. It's horrifying to be a girl these days. There are threats to our safety (climate change, school shootings, sexual assault) and threats to our humanity (beauty standards, expunging of abortion rights). When one thing stops bothering us, another pops up. Being a girl in the 2020s is like Whack-a-Mole. You stop worrying about that classmate who harasses you? Oh, well, you look horrible today. Did your friend get out of the mental hospital? Good thing you can still worry about your lack of a future.

Climate change isn't just a massive scientific problem. It's a sociological one. What happens when you tell fifth-grade children that their futures are doomed? I remember the first time I heard about climate change. My parents told me recycling wouldn't work, nor would reusing or reducing. I couldn't do anything then. It was out of my control. Everything was going to die—an elementary school existential crisis. Kids before us didn't have to

deal with that. And the sucker punch is that we have to go on. School doesn't stop, responsibilities certainly don't, and social pressures don't end. Instead, on a single day, climate educators teach you about your future and expect you to be okay with doing nothing and forgetting, going on to college, marriage, and babies (even if you don't want them!).

And the school shooting drills? We get told by teachers that they have to lock the doors twice, close all the windows, and force us all into a corner in silence. Do you know what it's like to practice death at school? To play around with a real risk? Kids thrive on play; they feel like it's real. That's why these drills are psychologically rough. Because they feel like someone is going to shoot them, and then they're supposed to just go to school the next day and pretend it never happened.

There are the boys who sat next to me in science class and joked about raping me. There are the boys who talk about being on drugs in Geometry class, and the stalkers who stop me on the street and say, "Age is just a number." There are the girls online who seem to have it all together, who look perfect. So what am I doing wrong? What do I not *get* about being a girl? Is there some secret code I missed out on, some guidebook? No, this is just how it is.

So yeah, of course, we're going psycho. Society pushed us into a maze and expected us to know the way out. So we give up because we're human.

When I was first diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder, I was sitting in a cramped, windowless room in a hospital ward.

"Well, this looks like a classic case of OCD," said the psychiatrist, narrowing her gaze. I adjusted my light blue gown, confused.

"No, I think you're wrong," I said. "I don't have OCD. I have

anxiety. I was diagnosed with it, and I've been to therapy."

"Well, what you told me is correct, right?" I nodded. "Then you have OCD."

The rest of the day was full of questions, answers, and a sense of undeniable relief. What I had been experiencing—a critical, intense, panic-filled set of obsessive thoughts that led me to mental compulsions—had never been as validated as it had been at that moment. As many are with a new diagnosis, it took me a while to finally step into that as a part of my identity. It felt lonely because I had only ever seen OCD depicted in one way: somebody who cleans and washes their hands a lot. Every time I had ever heard someone say, "I'm so OCD," I assumed it meant they were extremely organized. What I didn't realize was that my condition was much broader than that—and much more serious.

When I was finally released from the ward, I vowed to do everything I could to make sure that nobody would have to experience what I did. The months beforehand had been full of ups and downs (although mostly downs), and times when I sincerely thought I was going to die, or that I was not worthy of living. There were moments so intense that it felt like I had traveled to another dimension of time and space. I knew something had to be done about it to make sure that treatment could be accessible and information more widely available. Little did I know there was a whole world out there of people trying to do just that.

I attended the International OCD Foundation's conference in San Francisco in 2023. It hadn't yet been a year since my hospitalization, and I was in intensive ERP (Exposure and Response Therapy) to treat my symptoms. The conference halls were full of intelligent mental health experts and conference-goers attending and leading lectures on a variety of different topics.

Some were about exposure therapy and children, some were about managing obsessive symptoms in a partner, and one lecture even focused on psilocybin as a treatment for OCD (which tickled me at the time).

It wasn't over after I left the ward. It was just the beginning. The beginning of medication management, therapists, exposure response therapy, and withdrawal. The beginning of the struggle. The stigma was inside me from the beginning: when two psychiatrists told me I had bipolar disorder at age 12, I ignored them. I was too caught up in what a bipolar diagnosis would mean for me, too caught up in the fact that I would be certifiably mad, broken, doomed. That's what I thought bipolar meant.

At age 15, I started to recognize my hypomanic episodes—erratic bursts of energy and creativity and irrational buzz—as symptoms of bipolar disorder. My psychiatrist confirmed it. But after four years of learning about mental health, I realized that bipolar, as a diagnosis, didn't change something fundamental about my reality. All the diagnosis did was validate my struggle. It validated my low, buzzing depression for no reason, validated my chaotic productivity, and explained how my attitude towards life was like a rollercoaster. Why I had such intense motivation and curiosity to publish an academic book as a 14-year-old, and why some days my self-esteem felt like hell.

Diagnoses don't change who you are—they validate your existence as a flawed person who struggles with a condition that many people experience.

Attitudes towards mental health can be so reductive. You're either thriving or you're in the pits. You're either recovered or you're struggling. Nobody who has ever struggled with a mental health condition views it this way. You don't reach the summit and say, "Oh, I'm done now." You *can't* be done. It's hard work. It's work to show up, work to take care of yourself, work to make

relationships, even work to have fun. Writing this right now, I have a premonition that people will try to box in these statements I'm making; insinuate that I'm not better, that I'm crazy, uncontrollable, somehow dangerous for not admitting that I'm all healed. But the truth is, I'm not. Having a broken brain in a broken world isn't easily healed. That doesn't mean my voice doesn't matter. That also doesn't mean I'm in dire need of help. It just means I live with a biological and systemic illness, and I will for the rest of my life. You can admit that it's the worst thing that has ever happened to you, that you struggle with it every day, and your opinions and voice will still matter despite this illness. Having mental illness doesn't make you the Unabomber; it just means you have to pay agonizing attention to your moods, sleep, medication, and thoughts. I'm not dangerous, I'm just honest.

Gen Z understands this work. That's why my cousin apologized after our relative said I was a "big handwasher" when I mentioned my OCD. We're honest around each other about these things.

"Younger generations are more open about therapy and diagnoses, which I genuinely love to see, but at the same time, there is this pressure to look like you are healing perfectly," activist Miana Bryant told me in an interview. "Like you are self-aware, productive, and emotionally regulated all the time. That's not realistic for anyone. Sometimes people say they support mental health until someone is struggling in ways that are inconvenient or messy. Then it turns into 'you are too much' or 'you need to get it together,' and that is still a stigma, just in a more socially acceptable form." It's fascinating to note that the word stigma itself, in Greek, means a puncture or a tattoo—a branding. The experiences that puncture and mark women most deeply—sexual assault, mental illness, addiction—are the experiences we cannot talk about in public. The word in itself proves that stigma

is not natural, but a suppression of our deepest shared realities.

We accept mental illness in theory, and for many, in practice. That's huge progress. But nobody treats it that way. It's all talk about the epidemic, but with an epidemic comes acceptance. And that's what I've consistently felt in my generation: We struggle together. We accept that older generations aren't comfortable with saying they have OCD on national television, as I did. That's okay. We're different. In my opinion, this type of difference is preferable.

It's even more different for me, because I live in a sort of parallel life—an intellectual, mentally ill Hannah Montana, if you will. Some days I'm crying in my room, and some days I'm finishing my manuscript. The sheer "impossibility" of my writing and having a level of mental illness most people will never experience is hard for many to grasp—even me! I want the public to start seeing us as people instead of as programmed, controlled, or blamed. My illness gets in the way of writing this, but it also helps me. It's always a spectrum; people are different, and you cannot fit into the box they've given you as someone who struggles this way. Mental illness doesn't exempt me from being creative, successful, wrong, or right. It makes me a person just like any other illness does. Some days I'm being interviewed by a journalist, and some days I think I will die. It's a crossroads. A crossroads that I think everyone with mental health issues deals with: being a normal person and feeling desperately abnormal at times.

I get to live, and at times thrive, because I was born into a family that can afford therapy. I was born into a community that understands treatment. My paternal grandmother was a groundbreaking mental health reporter for USA Today for 25

years. My maternal grandfather is a psychology professor. Both of them knew exactly what medications I was on. Both of them understood my crisis in the larger context of society. Both of them knew I'd survive, even when I didn't.

Other young women often don't have that.

Other people don't have the privilege to understand their disease on a chemical level, to go to therapy twice a week, to go to experienced psychiatrists and get medications managed sustainably. I saw that. I saw how lucky I was. One person in my partial hospitalization program, River, was handling their nonbinary identity being rejected by their parents, outright abuse, and even more inhumane hospital conditions. They told me their horror stories– how they wanted to run away to a friend's house or commit suicide. The trained counselors couldn't handle this. I was terrified. Because what do you do when you have nothing?

It was already hard for me to get through, with all the privilege and knowledge that I have. What happens when your foundation gets stripped away? What if you don't have a foundation?

The nurses didn't treat me with respect. They didn't treat anyone with respect in the ward. It has always been a horrifying mystery to me how these patients soldiered on, how they were able to make it through. I have every bit of respect in the world for patients in mental wards. I've heard the stories. I've seen the stories. I've lived the stories. And I can't change them. But I can write about it. For you, for your daughters, for your friends.

I live with that guilt. The fact that, without the experts who have advised me, the therapists who have consoled me, and the parents who have paid for it, I wouldn't be here. And even if I were, I wouldn't be happy in any sense. That guilt doesn't matter, really—what's more important is recognizing that everyone deserves to be cared for, validated, and listened to, regardless of where our pain comes from or what exacerbates it. Every sin-

gle person struggling with mental illness has a unique, painful, poignant story, a specific intersection, a specific gap our system isn't filling. Ask them about it, be there for them, and listen to everyone, despite what you assume about them. Each one has a different path, a different view of beauty, life, and motivation. I want you to listen to them because they deserve personhood. They deserve to be more than a wristband, a name, a plethora of diagnoses. These are people we're talking about. I call myself crazy because that's what they called me. Because it's a radical acceptance of the truth: I'm uncomfortable with the system I'm living in, and I feel it. I feel everything. They do, too.

I owe this to the girls in the ward.

Kenidra Woods began her mental health advocacy journey at the age of 13, after the death of Michael Brown, a Black teen who was shot in 2014 by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, just miles from Woods' hometown. Following the murder, Woods decided to make activism her life's mission. She organized a walkout at her high school and a national rally for peace. She talked about gun violence and how it affected her community on the cover of Teen Vogue—the ultimate statement that girlhood for so many women isn't lip gloss: it's gun violence and self-harm, and we rarely talk about it.

Due to her bipolar depression, Woods was in and out of psychiatric facilities during her teen years. "I was around 15 years old, and before the idea for CHEETAH even came about, I had been struggling a lot with my mental health. I had been in and out of hospitals; I had been transferred to a residential facility after leaving a psych ward because I was told I wasn't yet fit to be around my family and needed 24-hour supervision. After I left the residential facility, I kind of just sat with myself and asked, 'Do I want to continue living my life this way?' I had been staying

at psychiatric facilities for much of my teen years, and I was tired of that being my life. I felt like I wasn't enjoying my teen years because I was going through these struggles with depression and self-harm. After going through these dark periods on my own, I just had the idea that maybe I could help somebody else who was going through similar struggles," Woods told Mission Magazine. CHEETAH stands for Confidence, Harmony, Enlightenment, Encouragement, Tranquility, Awareness, and Hope, the qualities Woods wants allies to have when discussing mental illness.

"My plan with CHEETAH was to be an advocate and a listening ear for others, even if it was just one person. Those years I spent at facilities and before that, just battling with my mental health and navigating trauma, it was such a lonely phase of my life, and I never want to see anyone go through what I've gone through, especially not someone I know. Struggling with your mental health is already really hard, but navigating those feelings on your own because you don't feel like you have anyone to turn to is even harder. I felt as though my biological family didn't understand what I was going through because mental illness is highly stigmatized in the Black community–it's seen as something shameful," she said. For many white women, mental illness is accepted as an illness. But for women of color, there's built-in shame and criminalization about struggling with a real sickness.

Woods wanted to turn her "anguish" with mental illness and racism into power. The CHEETAH movement is a support network for Black teens to move away from past representations of Black mental health and towards an inclusive, intersectional mental health movement with a "collective vision." Woods engages teens in dialogue about stereotypes, debunks popular myths, and fosters accessibility to care—all while dealing with her own diagnosis.

Up to 60% of Black women report symptoms of depression, and yet so much of mental health discourse revolves around a white-centric narrative, the "Girl, Interrupted," thin, white depressed girl. A big part of Gen Z mental health awareness is realizing how some struggles are minimized while others are supported. "It's an interesting conversation to have, especially with older generations, to focus on mental health, to focus on the betterment of people, and to discuss how past situations and future situations can lead to a lot of racial trauma and issues that people may be experiencing. It can lead to mood [swings], irritability, and a lot of other symptoms that may look as though somebody is acting out. Still, really, they're just requesting help, essentially," Miana Bryant, therapist and founder of the mental health support group The Mental Elephant, said. I talked to Miana about mental health stigma, representation, and how the Mental Elephant began.

"The Mental Elephant really grew out of my own lived experience, because I have dealt with major depressive disorder and anxiety for as long as I can remember. For a long time, I truly thought I was just an overthinker or too emotional, and I did not realize I was carrying something bigger." Bryant garnered national media attention for her vulnerable, knowledgeable voice on these topics and for her work organizing events and support groups. She focuses specifically on providing youth and African American and minority communities with knowledge, support, and infrastructure to understand mental illness.

"The Mental Elephant gave me community and language, and it helped me feel less alone while also helping others feel less alone. And honestly, it gave my pain purpose. When you can turn your experiences into something that supports other people, it fills a gap you might have been carrying for years without even realizing it." This is perhaps why I write about mental

health so much and participate in advocacy and activism around this topic. In situations with so little control, making real-world change is profoundly satisfying.

For Black women, the symptoms of depression are "acting out," which often leads to criminalization. The stereotype of the "strong Black woman" makes it difficult for Black women to seek support when they are really struggling. They are expected to suck it up, get over it, and put on a brave face. "For years, mainstream media has been perpetuating the ideology that black women don't *ask* for help—we *are* the help. History led me to believe that asking for help wasn't a luxury afforded to me. I believed it was something for rich (oftentimes white) people. I believed that I should be strong enough to forge onward without the external support," Jameelah Nasheed wrote for SELF magazine. Black women are expected to be strong and superhuman while being the most marginalized group in American history—it simply does not make any logical sense. The stereotype is the system itself: expecting everything, giving nothing.

There's also the fact that only 2% of psychiatrists in America are Black, and only 4% of therapists. When you don't see yourself in the struggle or in the treatment options available, it's really hard to just "get over it" or take the small offerings given. "For Black women who do have insurance that covers therapy, or the means to pay any out-of-pocket fees, some would prefer to work with someone who they feel can really relate to their personal experience. But it's not always easy to find that person," Nasheed continued. Many Black women find themselves educating the therapist on their experience rather than being listened to personally. The Black community, historically, has not trusted the medical establishment for a reason: they "experimented" on Black men with syphilis, on enslaved women without anesthe-

sia. Henrietta Lacks' cells are still used in most modern vaccines, though she never consented to that. The medical establishment has a history of using Black lives for its benefit. So why should the psychologists be trusted?

The entire system is made for a very specific type of suffering, not taking into account generational trauma, intersectional discrimination, and childhood psychiatry. Generational trauma, including slavery, patriarchy, and profound discrimination, contributes massively to mental health challenges. But this is rarely acknowledged in treatment, and that needs to change. We do not address the entire person; we address one cluster of symptoms as if it were a viral disease.

My family, having narrowly escaped the Holocaust and experiencing the deaths of entire branches of my family tree, has given me a completely different kind of pain than someone whose family has stayed in one place without a genocide. And yet that was never examined when I was getting treatment—the fact that my recent ancestors were also likely manic-depressive and would have benefited from modern psychiatry. I've experienced this; while I've been very lucky to go to therapy, I've never had a therapist who can understand how I'm feeling when I cry about my family's deaths by genocide decades earlier. It's just "sadness"; it's generic—bandage it with Prozac and call it a day.

Trans girls are also at a unique intersection in the mental health landscape. They are denied their rightful label, treated as "other" in nearly every situation, and often experience profound gender dysphoria and societal and familial labeling that makes just living in their identity unbearable. At least 40% of transgender adults attempt suicide in their lifetime. That is roughly equivalent to the attempts with a condition like bipolar, known for having the highest suicide rate of any mental illness. It's completely ridiculous to have to say this, but a valid, beautiful

identity change should not be put among the highest suicide risk categories. Arguing that mental illness is purely chemical is akin to arguing that the most marginalized groups in society have something innately wrong with them, that the queer community is inherently suicidal. That's not just wrong, it's a way that society shuts us up.

Suicide hotlines such as the Trevor Project, which exists specifically for LGBTQ+ youth, are losing government funding. Some of the only lifelines available are being cut off. And yet the system addresses them based on diagnoses instead of understanding their unique position as one of the most criminalized, marginalized groups in America.

Whether your ancestors lived through slavery or the Nazis or patriarchal control, the system does not care. It treats your mental illness as a blank slate with no causation, a simple chemical imbalance to be solved via sedation. I wrote about my ancestors on my hospital bed for a reason: they were the reason for so much of my joy and my suffering. That's true for all of us, but the system negates it. Nurses don't care about Nuremberg, psychiatrists don't ask about slavery. Nor do they wonder why the ward is filled with girls if it's purely a "chemical imbalance." Because it's easier to blame the girl than to blame her world, could it be true that all of us somehow have biologically messed-up brains, while the boys, for the most part, stay out on their soccer fields? The answer is not purely chemical. It's ancestral and systemic. Except the system can't start taking Prozac. They're scared of the real answer because it's not easy. That's exactly why we can't let them ignore it. This is not to say that chemical imbalances or biological illnesses are not real, especially in chronic severe cases like mine where they certainly are, but that pressure compounds, and we cannot rule out society's influence on our wellbeing. Just like any illness, there are numerous causes, and failing to address

the patient's roots or environment is a fatal misstep.

"We are always stronger together, so if we can conquer division, we can conquer anything," Kenidra Woods said. Mental illness is something we face together as girls. In the ward, in school, every day—together. In the same spaces, using the same words, the same pills, enduring the same system. We have to recognize that every one of us has a specific struggle, a specific intersection of ethnicity, trauma, gender identity, diagnosis, history, and community. That is not our flaw; it is our strength. If we wanted to make things easier for girls, we wouldn't separate them by arbitrary division. We would educate ourselves on the issues affecting other women. We would stand, every one of us, together just like I did in that ward.

13 Reasons Why, a popular Netflix show from 2017, also sparked intense controversy for its portrayal of mental illness. The show follows the suicide of high school girl Hannah Baker, who leaves tapes explaining why she decided to take her life. Portrayals of suicide in the media have been explicitly linked to increases in the suicide rate, so professionals were reasonably concerned before the premiere of *13 Reasons Why*. Netflix contacted mental health professionals to provide feedback on the series. Dan Reidenberg, the executive director of Suicide Awareness Voices of Education, advised Netflix not to release the series. They did—and the show became a catalyst for mental health education and suicide prevention. The detailed depiction of Baker's suicide in the show's first season was criticized as dangerous. Critics argued that the show portrayed suicide as "justified revenge" or a way of taking control of the "narrative," whatever that's supposed to mean. They were rightfully concerned, as portrayals like this one can lead to "contagion suicides" in vulnerable teenagers, yet another reason why accurate, intentional media representation is so important. It can be

so dangerous when not done correctly.

"[Thirteen Reasons Why] looked like a revenge story, like it would finally make people understand your pain or regret how they treated you," Miana Bryant told me. "And that worries me, because suicide is not a message or a lesson. It is a permanent end to situations that are often temporary and treatable. A lot of young people were watching that without enough guidance or context, and when you are already vulnerable, those portrayals can stick with you."

The media profoundly affects some people's decisions to end their very existence: if that's not important, what is? The show was associated with a 28.9% increase in suicide rates among U.S. youth ages 10-17 in April 2017, according to a study published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*. "The results of this study should raise awareness that young people are particularly vulnerable to the media," said study author Lisa Horowitz, Ph.D., M.P.H., a clinical scientist in the NIMH Intramural Research Program. "All disciplines, including the media, need to take good care to be constructive and thoughtful about topics that intersect with public health crises." Netflix called Thirteen Reasons Why a "catalyst for conversation," but it was really a catalyst for death. It's a prime example of Haidt's theory and of how "underprotection in the digital world," including media like this, can affect some girls. At the same time, many continue to live in a sanitized reality.

It's difficult to make a film about mental illness, one of the touchiest subjects, because no matter how you approach it, there is always someone you are leaving out. Even if your representation is diverse, you cannot possibly capture everyone's mental experience in a film. All filmmakers and writers can do is raise awareness about a specific diagnosis, mindset, or type of

person. Each of these representations matters, but each of them will garner criticism for various reasons. Just as it is astoundingly difficult to make a film about feminism or racism without offending someone, mental illness fits into the same category of careful handling. That's not to say that these kinds of films shouldn't be made– quite the opposite. But if you're trying to portray real, serious conditions, you can't mishandle them, as in the case of Thirteen Reasons Why.

So many of these films decide to focus on suicide. Despite suicide being incredibly important to discuss openly, showcasing suicide more often than thriving or simply living with mental illness is a problem. Real people who are struggling with serious conditions watch these representations. If they can't see thriving or treatment options onscreen, their possibility of living a full life feels starker than it is. We are not living in a blindfolded bubble. We are out in the real world, interpreting our futures through media like everyone else. Suicide isn't the only option when you struggle—it's the lethal exception. We need to see real living, or else we might not believe it's possible.

Turtles All the Way Down is a prime example of this kind of representation. Aza Holmes, a 16-year-old with severe OCD, investigates the disappearance of a mysterious billionaire with her best friend Daisy and begins a relationship with the billionaire's son and her old friend, Davis. I cried when I watched it—sobbed, actually, from recognition. I'm a film critic, and I'd never sobbed watching a movie. Given the terror of living with this condition that I deal with every day, I finally saw myself onscreen after an entire life of being misunderstood.

We usually see diagnoses in isolation. For example, to the general public, OCD means compulsive handwashing. In Turtles All The Way Down, it's so much more. It's the guilt glue that holds Aza's life together and tears her down. We see her

life interacting with her disease viscerally; that's rare in mental health representation. She swallows hand sanitizer *and* kisses boys, has dreams for a future, *and* can't stop her thought spirals. I want to see the girl and the diagnosis, not the list of symptoms and the caricature. I want to see the real effect, the treatment, the crying, the misunderstandings, the living that comes along with suffering from mental illness. Living with it is the point, and yet we rarely ever see that. We see it in isolation.

When I asked Miana Bryant about mental health portrayals gone wrong, she mentioned Euphoria—the glittery, colorful Gen Z portrayal of toxic relationships, drug use, and mental illness. Symptoms aren't shown with enough context in some of these portrayals. Sometimes, without even realizing it, representation can go awry, even through aesthetics alone. The show's artistic cinematography, fashionable makeup and costumes, and vibrant lighting contribute to the feeling of aestheticization of real issues. The way you see Euphoria will vary based on your interpretation. It's an undeniably heavy show that is meant to serve as a "cautionary tale," with content warnings. Still, according to some, it can sometimes lean towards the glitter rather than the destruction when it comes to mental illness. "In Euphoria, symptoms are often shown without enough context. Mental illness can look very different from person to person, and it is not a vibe or an aesthetic. It is something people live with and try to manage every day, and that can be exhausting."

On the other hand, I find that Euphoria is mirror-adjacent in its representation of Gen Z teenage life. When I watched it, I found myself bewildered by the sheer amount of dark subject matter it addressed. Then I realized that this wasn't standard confoundment, it was recognition. Recognition of my experiences and the experiences of my peers that had not been confronted. I refer

to the girls rationalizing date rape in chemistry lab, the trans girl who left for the mental hospital and never came back, the racist comments, the sexual harassment, the toxically masculine paradigm that haunts teen boys. Also, there was porn, drugs, mental illness, sexual trauma and trafficking, teen pregnancy, self-harm, and social media. Adults may not realize that the world inhabited by the teens in Euphoria is not dystopian; it is our reality. Euphoria should be recognized for its profound honesty about not just the experience of mental illness but the world of expectation of mistreatment that helps to create and also perpetuates these conditions. Glitter and grime, beauty and trauma, once again, the central cognitive dissonance and contradiction of Gen Z reality, especially for girls. Euphoria has it all.

Still, some of my favorite representations of mental illness onscreen aren't happy—they're honest. Ingrid Goes West, starring Aubrey Plaza, is terrifying. Not just because it's a horror film, but because every minute of it is a bullet to the faults of 21st-century digital life. The main question the audience asks while watching is: Is Ingrid crazy, or is it the world? After all, she's suffering in isolation with mental illness and grief, sucked into the beachy, aesthetic world of Instagram, and can't help but cling to it. She goes too far. *But is it really too far in a system that kills women for not being perfect?* It was a critical hit because Ingrid does what we all wish we dared to do. She isn't just a sufferer: she's impulsive and makes real actions and real plans from her desires. She's not a slave to the system; she's a spy who goes mad. The entire film is about Ingrid's relationship with Taylor Sloane, an Instagram star with posts of Joan Didion books she's never read and meals she won't eat. Ingrid finds her way into Taylor's social circle but gets caught, sliding into insanity, posting a suicidal video on Instagram, and miraculously waking up to a viral video.

Because now society isn't just the catalyst for our craziness (like 100 years ago), but it rewards it. Honesty, authenticity, realism. Society wants both, and that's the danger. Post your beach summer and your suicide note. Instagram will love it.

One of my favorite examples of monoculture is a particular Taylor Swift publicity cycle. In her 2024 album The Tortured Poets Department, Swift used mental illness as a marketing plan. She played a character who goes through electroshock therapy in her music video, putting on a depressive act. Her team posted a remix of one of Swift's songs: "Us before they put a straightjacket and grippy socks on us at the club." Grippy sock vacation has become a Gen Z slang term for the mental hospital. It's cute to the people who haven't taken a trip, horrendous to the people who have, the people who, like me, were traumatized by paper wristbands, blood draws, and grippy socks for years. If only these people who romanticized mental illness were locked indoors for two weeks, writing suicide notes and watching their friends draw cuts in their skin with paperclips. You think it's cool until you know the real human cost, the piles of bodies that no one even knows exist. You think it's cool until your friends are dying and your psychiatrist is scared for your life. You think it's cool, and that's a privilege. There are dozens of days in my life where I can't remember thinking. At least you can think at all.

That's the whole issue with mental health romanticization: it's cute…until you know it for real. And when you actually know it, you wish psychosis would go to hell. It's a special kind of privilege to make an aesthetic out of suffering and death. It's a special kind of naivete to try on anxiety as some kind of popularity costume. I'm jealous of people who get to choose mental illness "for fun." Because I can never take that "costume" off. I cannot afford to joke around about this using internet aesthetics; I can only afford to put one foot in front of the other.

For most people, everyday life isn't life-threatening. For people with mental illness, it is.

For depression, there's hope, and there are viral videos. There are new treatments, and there's harmful legislation. It's always a balancing act with modern mental health. It's on screen more, but it's also romanticized more.

Somehow, among everything we know, a girl is still in the ward, a girl is still ending her life. That's why we can't just call it "cute." We have to call it lethal. We have to take it seriously. Gen Z is the first generation to understand the complexities of this. We've all had friends in the ward, family with depression, and probably struggled with it ourselves. We have the DSM, the knowledge, and the power to educate ourselves and everyone we know. That doesn't stop it from affecting us. That's one of the things modern technology, politics, and advances have taught us: you can't aestheticize your way out of human nature, out of biology. We can name the cage, but we're still in it.

Whether we're called "crazy" or "viral," that doesn't erase the fact that we're facing this struggle head-on. That's a triumph, even if it's still hard to breathe.

Chapter 9: Female Rage
or: Why Won't You Let Us Scream Already?

Gen Z girls want to scream.

Not a perfect scream. Not a quiet one. A piercing, thunderous scream; a scream that destroys the ground beneath us, shatters our reality. A scream that would make them pay attention to us, look at us, listen to us, at a time when no one does—at a time when it feels like we're invisible.

And the screams? Well, they're working.

2021's *Moxie* opens with this same scream. A girl sprints through a forest, trampling through dewy leaves and crackling branches. She lets out a sharp shriek, but it's completely inaudible. And another one, but we still can't hear it. She lies on the forest floor in desperate solitude.

Then we see that it was all a dream.

Moxie came out mid-pandemic, in a haze of political and societal confusion. After a year when most of us were bingeing Netflix or reading news about ventilators and vaccines, this movie was a fascinating reprieve and a take on modern high school life for girls at a time when we weren't sure normalcy would ever return. Beyond that, it's a movie about the legacy of feminism and the enduring grip of misogyny on today's youth. The film's treatment of these issues raised some red flags and started an important conversation about womanhood in the

2020s, before we knew the full extent of the experience—and the full extent of the rage.

When the movie came out, I watched it on my couch and learned about so many of the issues it tackles for the first time: dress coding, sexual assault, and how sexism turns up in even the most mundane of conversations. In my mind, the movie turned my perception of feminism from a battle that was won into an evolving, multifaceted issue.

But more importantly, it made me *mad*.

Moxie is about a 16-year-old girl named Vivian who starts an anonymous feminist zine inspired by her mom's '90s "#girlboss" riot grrl past. The zine gains traction as students realize how toxic the school's environment is (with rankings, dress codes, and comments from guys), and they all start to band together and rebel. By the end of the film, the scream isn't silent anymore; every girl in the room voices it. And I took note.

That year, I started a group with my middle-school friends called "*Moxie* Girls Fight Back." We drew black Sharpie stars on our hands (like in the movie) and talked about our opinions on our rights, the women before us, and being girls today. I started to realize, while watching this movie, that I had the right to be angry. That we all do.

That said, *Moxie*'s reception was not entirely positive. The movie has many women of color prominently featured, but the main character is privileged and white, falling into the traditional "good feminist" look (characterized by people like Gloria Steinem).

"The movie has a wonderfully diverse cast, with trans, disabled, second-generation immigrant representation, and more. And yet it is Vivian who becomes the leader of their newfound 'feminist revolution.' At the same time, her friends serve as accessories to help Vivian with character growth as she continuously

messes up," Dianna Shenn wrote for the NYU Local of *Moxie*.

It's true: *Moxie* briefly touches on white feminism and privilege, but then averts our gaze to a dinner scene with a boyfriend and never returns to it. "*Moxie* feels like a shallow attempt at pandering to 'woke' audiences by giving off the impression that it is inclusive: a diverse cast, a lesbian kiss, even a reference from Amy Poehler's character herself acknowledging how back then, '*they weren't intersectional enough*.' Yet absolutely nothing comes from this as the story continues to ignore the real roots of all these problems," Shenn continued.

Who gets to share their rage? Whose screams are actually heard? Marginalized groups must scream even louder and risk even greater consequences. That's why it's so important for feminist films to make sure viewers hear the full symphony of voices—and that the scream is not a solo.

For women of color and their rage, blame is often attributed to internal characteristics rather than external circumstances. Instead of "She must be in a really hard situation," it's "She must be crazy." And while female rage technically applies to all women, some women of color feel that their rage is just rage, not "feminine." Black women, especially, can feel that their anger is portrayed as animalistic and hysterical, or that they will be put into a certain label if they dare express it. Anger for white women, while still not accepted widely, is less criticized than anger expressed by women of color. White women can be "delicately broken" or simply weak. Women of color are not afforded this.

Even today, when we think women have power, we still can't scream without systemic contempt. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't let our feelings be known. "Is there a woman who has lost her temper in public and didn't face ridicule, temporary ruin, or both? Can you think of one?" Lindy West wrote in her book *The Witches are Coming*, a collection of essays centered around

rage and #MeToo. We see this effect even in our personal day-to-day lives: when a woman screams or gets angry, it elicits an unexpected, uncomfortable physical reaction. When a man gets mad, he's being a man.

People miss something key about intersectional feminism: it's not about excluding white women. It's about making sure everyone's story is told. So, Netflix. To make Gen Z happy with your movie doesn't actually seem that hard (to us). All we ask for is diverse character representation and conversations that actually address issues instead of skimming them. Hollywood gets half of the story, and *Moxie* does too. They know we're mad. They know it's hard to be a woman these days. But they don't know the whole story.

There was a hidden gem in *Moxie* —the school party scene—a performance of Bikini Kill's "Rebel Girl." The Linda Lindas are the punky singing voices onstage, wearing pale blue electric guitars and screaming their hearts out. And this was only the beginning of their ascent to becoming the Gen Z queens of punk female rage.

The Linda Lindas got their start in 2018. The group consists of two sisters (Lucia and Mila de la Garza), their cousin Eloise Wong, and family friend Bela Salazar. Lucia and Mila's dad, Carlos de la Garza, a producer and mixer for bands including Paramore, raised his daughters at punk shows and provided the environment and inspiration that propelled the girls into punk rock early on.

After the members met at Girlschool LA, a music camp in Southern California, they came together to back up musician Kristin Kontrol at a concert. They named themselves after a 2005 foreign film (*Linda Linda Linda*), about four Japanese teenagers in a rock band, and started performing at other local benefit shows. Kathleen Hanna, the lead singer of Riot Grrl,

invited the Linda Lindas to open for her at a show in 2019—a show which Amy Poehler attended, leading to their performance in Netflix's *Moxie*.

In 2020, the band's first recorded song was heard in the Netflix short *The Claudia Kishi Club* (Junk food, art, style, and mystery/Talkin' bout Claudia Kishi). They performed a new song at the LA Public Library in early 2021: "Racist Sexist Boy," their breakout hit. The song's origin lies in the pandemic's political and racial confusion.

"A boy from school came up to me and told me that his dad had told him to 'stay away from Chinese people' because of the virus," Mila de la Garza said in an interview with CBS Mornings. This incident inspired the band members, who identify as Asian and Latinx, to craft a biting song about being an Asian girl in America during COVID (We rebuild what you destroy/You are a racist, sexist boy). "Especially at our age, you feel like you can't do anything about it," Lucia said of the song's premise. "But you can write a song about it," the interviewer responds.

Their band became something out of a 1990s feminist punk fever dream: four screaming, raging teen girls wearing polka dots, checkerboard, and vintage t-shirts. Their performances, videos, and messages seem both pre-Internet nostalgic *and* very clearly of this era. The Linda Lindas clearly drew inspiration from many late-20th-century rock bands. Their actual lyrical content is about being a teenager now, in this moment where it is crazy, absurd, and utterly confusing to be young.

Aside from the fact that they're known for letting out their screams onstage, The Linda Lindas' songs are all about the rage and insecurity of teen girlhood. My favorite song of theirs is from their second album, *No Obligation*, which came out in 2024. Lucia de Garza's "All in My Head" was inspired by Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*.

Its psychedelic music video features notebook doodle cut-outs, flip phones, and lots of books (paper books, obviously…). It's a mix of 2000s nostalgia and information-age-propelled teenage angst. Lucia lies in her bed reading as crumpled papers, empty boba cups, and stuffed animals pile up all over her room—she begins to skip plans with friends and continues to lie in bed until she falls into despair (also known as the hole in the center of her bed). It's exactly the kind of cinematic, nostalgia-bending music video Gen Z relates to.

The lyrics chronicle not just mental health struggles, but the "bed rot" dreamy negative thought spiral that teen girls are prone to: I like it better when it's all in my head/I like to spend all day dreaming in bed/And nobody knows the pain I'm going through, de Garza sings. "All in My Head" is the album's indie-punk-rock thought spiral, accompanied by disobedient rage on the opening title track, "No Obligation," written by the band's bassist and vocalist, Eloise Wong.

The song could easily be viewed as the punk-rock anthem of this book, with its defiant response to all the pressures of growing up in the 2020s. The lyrics are strikingly simple, but it's a radical statement about the unreachable expectations we face as teen girls. The verses appeal to the expectations of traditional femininity: You'd like me better if I grew out my hair/You'd like me better if I wasn't a mess/You'd like me better if I'd put on a dress, she sings.

"Eloise wrote this ripper because we won't adhere to what anyone else thinks we should sound like or who they think we are," the band said in an interview. "We don't make music out of obligation – we make music out of love."

Their Tiny Desk concert features custom mosaic guitars, striped pants, and endless headbanging. It's the kind of performance that's both angry and carefree. There's clearly so

much happiness for them from writing about their emotions, screaming them out, and spending time with their sisters and best friends. This band is the best example of how rage, as an emotion, can be incredibly productive.

The Linda Lindas are one striking, inspiring example of Gen Z women turning our rage into art and change. We don't have to crumble in light of the obligations we face: we can ignore them or choose to mock them radically. I first experienced this phenomenon, what I call the "radical acceptance of rage," in August 2024 at a concert.

Olivia Rodrigo skipped onstage in a bright red jumpsuit to sing her rock anthem "All American Bitch." The song lyrics are a satirical take on the perils and rage of modern womanhood, in which Rodrigo pretends to be blissfully happy in her role. The entire arena was full of teen girls. *Full.* I looked around and could not see any other demographic. We're already screaming the lyrics when she suddenly stops singing in the middle of the song.

"Okay, here's the deal. When the lights go off, I want everyone in here to think about something or someone that just *really* fucking pisses you off," Rodrigo says into the microphone. "And I want you to scream your heart out. Are you ready?" And suddenly, the energy of 20,000 teen girls thinking about their deepest rage was enough to make me feel as if the ground were shaking. The collective anger, the collective sadness,, and the confusion were enough to fuel a rocket ship. And so the lights went off, and we all screamed so loud, I could've sworn the entire city heard us.

It lasted for as long as our vocal cords could stand—I thought about all the people who had misunderstood me, underestimated me, and taken me for less than I was. All the times I could have been heard but was instead pushed aside. I went back to the hospital in my head. The nurses who kept me in my

room and doubted my recovery, the girls alongside me who had lost faith in themselves, the total surrender to the idea of living (or *not* living) this way for the rest of my life. I thought about all the women before me who'd had their ideas and dreams silenced and been sentenced to an unfulfilling life.

And I realized it was all about society's grip, its control over us. The government can hold power over our bodies and health. Diet culture forces us to get smaller and smaller, and punishes us if we don't. When we try to escape, these images lash back at us. We are forced to try to fit into something that has never worked. And everything just feels…absolutely, positively impossible.

And so we scream. We lash out. We decide we hate everyone and everything. We decide that we are destined to feel this way forever. And we don't let them forget: hell is a teenage girl.

This "hell" has made its way into the farthest spectrums of culture, including a smash Broadway play, John Proctor is the Villain, written by Kimberly Belflower.

"Five young women running on pop music, optimism, and fury are about to shed light on some of the darkest secrets in their one-stoplight town," the synopsis reads. John Proctor is the Villain is set in a high school English classroom in a small town in Georgia in 2018. The class's curriculum includes *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller, which centers on the Salem witch trials. The students, who are navigating accusations of sexual assault and misconduct that have happened in their town, begin to reinterpret the story from a #MeToo perspective. They debate whether John Proctor was truly the hero of the story, which leads to a questioning and a reckoning with male figures in power and their influence on women's lives.

The real genius of *John Proctor* is its incredible mimicry of the way Gen Z girls talk: "I like dark stuff. Female rage," quickly

segways into "I genuinely want Taylor Swift to murder John Mayer," and then into "surprise bitch!" It's so devastatingly accurate that you'll stop in your tracks when you realize it wasn't written by a teenage girl of *this* moment (Belflower is nearly 40). That's why it's so important to talk about—because this play, the way these girls talk, their topics of conversation, their emotions, their contradictions, this is exactly how we feel. And in this play, the way we feel and the way we speak are validated in a way they had never been before. By having the characters start a "feminism club" at their school, Belflower opens a conversation onstage that feels so of this moment that you're left thinking: "Wait, this is a play?"

The girls are navigating feminist perspectives for the first time, and many of these striking ideas are revealed as if being heard for the first time. "My mom says it to my aunt on the phone like I can't hear, she's like: "Nell's just a lot," "Nell is so dramatic these days," "Nell is too much for me right now." When people say stuff like that, they always kinda mean the same thing. What they really mean is just 'Nell's a girl.'"

This play is all about watching teen girls come into their power, realize the hypocrisy of their situation, and let it all out. "Teenage girls are so monitored and observed and objectified and are expected to be a certain thing," Belflower told the New York Times. "It's a lose-lose in a lot of ways. So just having the opportunity to let go of that, and be, like, ugly and loud — it opens something up."

Belflower isn't your average playwright—she refuses to write mechanical stage directions and instead lets her script be *alive* in all of its truth. When a male character pushes over a desk, she doesn't just write the fact. She writes the feeling. "It makes you think about that time in college acting class/when a guy punched a hole through the wall right next to his female scene

partner/and your professor praised him for being "truthful"/ it makes you think about how many times you've heard/'boys will be boys.'"

It's this kind of searing anger, hidden beneath witticisms, that makes this play as real as its context. It's messy, complicated, and written from lived experience. It's the opposite of *Ginny & Georgia*, or *Moxie*, which capture certain inflections authentically, while the rest feel affected by older generations' views of us. And this play is quintessentially Gen Z, because reinterpreting the past is our thing. We like nostalgia: picking apart old media, forgotten gems, and literature. We come to realize that *The Great Gatsby* might not be the classic it once was, and we come to terms with the fact that so much of the media we are fed is problematic. This play is of our generation down to its references: young people have access to a massive amount of media, so the characters in John Proctor reference everything from Joan Didion to Selena Gomez to Walt Whitman. It's the intellectual breadth, the ability to trace the struggles of women (in media and in everything), that makes it of this moment.

That's what it means to be a woman these days. Understanding that everything you know, every woman who came before you, lived in a society that doesn't value our worth.

John Proctor makes no concessions; just because these girls deconstructed their belief systems and stood up for what they thought was right and against what they thought was wrong doesn't make it any easier for them to live in a broken system. In the striking final scene, when the girls do a cathartic interpretive dance reinterpreting The Crucible, they have to go to summer school. Mr. Smith, the teacher who seems initially excited about their "feminism club," turns on it when Shelby reveals his predatory behavior towards her. It's a scene that directly mir-

rors the #MeToo movement itself. Freedom of expression for women always comes at a cost. "We see these girls who have been through so much celebrate each other and show up for each other in this really defiant, brave way, and make something from the pain that they've gone through," Belflower said. Anger is alchemy. Turn that fury into gold, and it becomes something bigger than yourself.

So fine! We're mad. We're livid. We're screaming "madwomen," as we've always been. But we have a reason to be. And that's why *John Proctor is the Villain* resonated with so many of us. Because young women dancing, screaming, debating our feelings, questioning the morals we're taught in America—these aren't usually things we're allowed to be doing. These behaviors—wanting to smash things, scream, and express—are not usually shown outside of incredibly confined spaces, let alone on a Broadway stage.

These spaces I'm talking about have become incredibly popular for young women, and they're called rage rooms. Rage rooms are spaces where customers pay to smash computers, phones, dishes, and furniture with a bat in a contained setting.

In 2008, rage rooms were largely unknown. During the Great Recession, The Venting Place, in Tokyo, became one of the first rage rooms. Japanese workers initially used the business to relieve stress during economic hardship, but this phenomenon quickly spread around the world like broken glass hitting the floor. Americans appreciated it as an "alternative coping mechanism," and social media provided an environment for these "aesthetic" rage rooms to thrive.

The idea is appealing to most people—the sound of broken ceramics, the feeling of smashing a guitar until the strips of wood and strings break to pieces. Especially for women, who make up

70-75% of rage room clientele. The problem is, most psychologists don't believe it really "works." The "Catharsis Hypothesis" was first posited by Aristotle in his work Poetics as an observation describing the emotional release (or "catharsis") experienced while viewing a tragedy. Aristotle viewed catharsis as a way of purging or purifying pity and fear, ridding the body of these emotions by leaving everything in the theater—essentially, if people watched tragedy onstage, they could experience and then purge these emotions. This concept was later adapted by Freud (and his colleague Josef Breuer), who viewed it as a psychological treatment of release. It was first a hypnotic technique, where patients recalled traumatic experiences and expressed them, and then catharsis became a way to bring unconscious feelings and memories into conscious awareness, seemingly alleviating distress.

However, since the 1970s, a wide body of psychological research has largely debunked the Catharsis Hypothesis. In fact, scientists have found the exact opposite to be true. Expressing anger often increases aggression. Instead of "letting off steam," engaging in rageful behavior tends to create more conflict and reinforce aggressive tendencies. There's a fine line to be walked here, however: there has to be somewhere between suppressing anger and paying $45 to go to one of these rooms.

Controlled expression of emotion has benefits in therapeutic contexts and can often be productive (especially in the case of young women's very directed anger), leading to change rather than ignorance. However, commercialized rage, on a corporate scale, is less effective.

There's also a clear difference between the two types of anger expressed in rage rooms. "There are two types of anger. The positive one, in which we affirm ourselves and let others know that their behavior is bad and cannot continue, and the negative

one, which is violence. Anger rooms do not have a therapeutic effect because they are an expression of violence," psychologist Florence Millot told Huck Magazine. "Having destroyed everything, in order to address the cause of anger, you must begin to repair and reconstruct."

In the case of societally-induced female rage, we must not *just* smash the chair to pieces: we have to rebuild it. A $45 30-minute rage room session is just that: 30 minutes. It's a metaphorical band-aid to systemic oppression. Feelings are signs that something is either very wrong or very right. If we ignore the anger, we ignore the societal problem. And that's why directing our anger toward destruction isn't necessarily productive (or even therapeutic). Because it doesn't address the root cause. But do you know what does? Collective action.

Just like in that crowded arena, where we all screamed and thought about different things coming from the same source (systemic ignorance and oppression), we can channel our rage into real creativity and productivity. The scream is the starting point of realization, and the echo is where things start to change. Knowing all of this about anger can be immensely helpful. It's okay to scream; it's okay to do what you need to do to let it out—but after that, we must take real actions to change things. The cause of this anger is the Modern Cage, and finding our way out of it isn't as easy as physical damage—the problem is way, way deeper than 30 minutes of broken glass. The cage has changed over thousands of years. For Deanie, it was domestic life and purity; for us, it's social media omnipresence, physical perfection standards, and performance. The Modern Cage is a contradiction that has damaged every aspect of our lives. The anger is us trying to break it.

And yet still, despite the thousands of us lashing out in rage

rooms and pop stars' arenas, women are rarely, if ever, allowed to show their anger in public. Emotions between the sexes are deeply nuanced, and the reason that strong feelings appear as rage in men is surprising. Men are societally conditioned to believe that their emotions are not worth displaying, so strong feelings often manifest as rage. Feel sad? You're probably just mad. For women, sadness is more culturally accepted, as is a wide range of emotions (although there's also a stereotype about this: 'Are you on your period?'), so we might just naturally feel less rage. I reject this idea. Just because we're not "allowed" to feel something doesn't mean it's not brewing on the surface. In fact, as this chapter has shown, it's alive in all of us—more than ever.

"What if we didn't sever anger from femininity? The effect is that when we say what's important to us, which is what anger is conveying, people are more likely to get angry at us for *being* angry," Soraya Chemaly said in her 2019 TED talk. Whether we're at home or at school or in a political arena, anger confirms masculinity and confounds femininity. If we're faced with a threatening street harasser, a predatory employer, a sexist, racist classmate, our brains are screaming 'are you kidding me!?' and our mouths say 'I'm sorry, what?'"

Women are taught to be peacekeepers and mediators, and yet we're also humans. And thus comes the fundamental hypocrisy: share our rage, feel our feelings, make them known. Our brains tell us to punch, scream, and jump. And our society tells us not to "make a big deal out of it." But what if it *is* a big deal? What if what people call 'minor inconveniences' aren't being paid enough attention? What if the harassment, control, and violence we faced daily were worthy of rage, worthy of expression?

The truth is, society has forced us to push these agonizing feelings down. We are taught to say "I'm fine, I'll get over it," or "I'm okay," because it's easier for others to hear than "I fucking

hate this, and I'm livid." The truth is, for so long, we've chosen compliance over expression, and we've paid the price. Anger is implicated in a long list of diseases we categorize as "women's issues." Anger, and the suppression of it, is linked to heart disease, thyroid disease, autoimmune disorders, disordered eating, chronic pain, digestive disorders, bipolar disorder, and more. The suppression of our pain, our rage, is literally killing us. That's why we're screaming: not because it's "fun," not because it's "therapeutic," but because if we didn't, it feels like we'd die—and in some ways, that's not even an exaggeration.

"I am sick and tired of the women I know being sick and tired," Chemaly concluded in her TED talk. "Our anger brings great discomfort, and the conflict comes because it's our role to bring comfort. We can be mad, but we can't be angry about the tremendous costs of nurturing." When will the time come when women are allowed to be angry in the ways *we* want to, instead of staying in our lane? And what tremendous change would this rage cause?

The truth about anger is that it is not a pretty emotion. Women in history and culture are expected to do everything in a pretty way, from the prim and proper 1950s housewives in their pale yellow dresses to media depictions of childbirth to Hamlet's Ophelia, still looking beautiful even dead. We are never supposed to be ugly, never supposed to cry without looking beautiful, never supposed to show our weakness without showing our appeal. This is perhaps why we are blocked off from rage, and why we have fought so hard to have the right to feel it. Rage isn't as poetic as Ophelia drowning in a river or Sleeping Beauty being pricked by a sewing needle. It's primal, it's ugly, it's real. Women are expected to be objects. Rage makes us human—that's why they don't let us feel it.

It's just like diet culture, namely the silent, creeping messages living in our bodies and minds that tell us to make ourselves smaller, tell us that we're the problem. "What if the problem is you?" is the excuse for making women feel less than. It's rarely true. People are imperfect. People scream, feel, and cry, at least when they're emotionally intelligent. Humans are ugly. Humans are imperfect. And as women, too often we aren't granted the privilege of being human.

For millennia, women have been sponges that quietly absorbed male behavior. We are hatred sponges. We absorb harm, hatred, and male rage. And we can never wring out. We can never release the expectation, the mistreatment. And so we are left full, full all the time, about to burst, because being a woman means you can't release yourself. And so we don't.

Denying women rage is denying us humanity—denying us control over recognizing when our lives are skewed, when things are wretched and unfair, when we can't fight back. The system exists and persists because we are told not to care when things don't go our way. If we get mad, things may change. They don't want that.

This isn't philosophical, it's not theoretical. Collective anger drives change, and the #MeToo movement proves that.

But before #MeToo, the Women's March showed we had power and could use it.

It was January 21, 2017, the day after Trump's first inauguration ceremony. And women were mad. Mad about Trump's policies and ideologies, Trump's speeches and words still ringing in their ears, mad about the endless men who have degraded women into objects (or rather, sponges), mad about the systems that protect male comfort and pleasure over our human rights.

This anger erupted into flames that day: flames that would

deconstruct the notions around what it meant to be a woman—and to be a man.

The event had started humbly: Teresa Shook, a retired lawyer living in Hawaii, started a Facebook event the night of Trump's election. She wasn't the only one who'd had this idea; in fact, Evvie Harmon, Fontaine Pearson, Bob Bland (a New York fashion designer), and Breanne Butler all came up with similar march ideas, and they decided to consolidate and create one huge protest. Activists, filmmakers, and politicians joined in, taking leadership and organizational positions, and an active effort was made to bring women of all backgrounds into this fight.

Trump's presidency sparked the protest, but that wasn't the ultimate goal. March organizers told the press that they were "not targeting Trump specifically" and that the event was "more about being proactive about women's rights". And the rights of everyone—people with disabilities, people of color, workers.

This is not to say that anger at Trump's policies wasn't present on that day. In fact, the pussy hats worn by many protesters were inspired by Trump's viral statement from 2005: women would let him "grab them by the pussy." This wasn't just a joke; it was a reclaiming of a word used against us. Just like "bitch" had once crossed from offensive to playful, "pussy" became meaningful when we used it ourselves, when we wore it on our heads. The hat became popular on social media, too; the hat pattern got 100,000 downloads.

The organizers partnered with Planned Parenthood. They held meetings. They recruited activists. Nearly every power, every person, every activist, was at their fingertips—it was unprecedented. It wasn't just D.C. Nearly every major city was flooded with hundreds of thousands of protesters: estimated at 1 million in Washington, D.C., 750,000 in Los Angeles, and

400,000 in New York City. There were 3 to 5 million protesters worldwide, on every single continent, even Antarctica! The viral pictures were all of the creative signs: "Girls Just Want to Have Fun-damental Rights," "The Future is Female," "Granddaughters of Witches."

When the Women's March happened, I was seven years old. I'd been featured in *San Francisco Magazine* in 2016 and did a photoshoot with a bunch of other girls talking about what Hillary Clinton meant to us. My sister made an angry face in the photo: she's wearing a button on her shirt that says "Love Trumps Hate." I'm just standing there.

When you're that young, a part of you understands how important, how history-making the moments you're living through are. And part of you is thinking about rainbow goldfish crackers. I don't even remember the Women's March. But what I do remember is the feeling when Hillary lost: I called all of my grandparents. It felt to me that night like the end of the world. First graders don't check the *New York Times* or watch poll numbers—but they know, even subconsciously, what power means, what role models represent. I remember that night because it meant more to me than politics. Hillary Clinton, even if she never intended it, became a symbol for girls who want to change things, be big, be successful, and still be women. We were told women could be anything. We didn't see it happening. Having a female president meant validation that it was okay to want big things and be a girl. I knew that then, and I know it now.

The Women's March was the largest protest in American history. But it was only the beginning.

The #MeToo movement actually began far before the March in 2017.

Tarana Burke was sick of watching the women around her

be consistently assaulted and harassed—not just by men, but by society. She'd grown up in New York City, where, as a young girl, she developed an interest in activism and joined the youth development organization 21st Century Youth Leadership Movement. While attending Alabama State University, Burke organized protests for racial justice and launched initiatives to raise awareness of economic insecurity, housing inequality, and racial discrimination.

Burke had worked with survivors of sexual violence and, just like she always had, decided to change things– this time by organizing people and providing a safe space for teenage Black girls to focus on health and self-esteem. It was 2005 when Burke was working with a young girl in the program who had experienced abuse. She coined the term "Me Too" as a way of providing solidarity for survivors and victims of abuse. It was a term that generated empathy between women, a catalyst for change.

Then, in October of 2017, nine months after the Women's March and after the investigation reports detailing Harvey Weinstein's abuse, actress and activist Alyssa Milano tweeted something monumental. It was a reply to another woman's idea: that if "all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote 'Me Too' as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem." Alyssa added: "Write Me Too as a response to this tweet." And that's how the movement truly began. With a tweet. How 21st century of us.

I find it telling that the movement took off when a white woman acknowledged and promoted a statement that Burke had been promoting for more than ten years. Even in this seemingly progressive moment, there's still a bias on whose screams—or tweets—get paid attention to, or silenced. This is the same pattern we saw in *Moxie*: strong-willed women of color try to make

their voices heard, and white women get the credit. Burke's message had been brewing for years. Why did it take a famous white actress to get the ball rolling? Why must our anger (#MeToo) always be pretty (famous, esteemed actresses)? The messenger had to be archetypal because the message wasn't. The truth is, society wasn't ready to hear it from the source. They needed a diversion, a middleman. And that says more than anything else.

During the fall of that year, more and more allegations against famous men mounted. Roy Price, Larry Nassar, and even old Hollywood actors (Clark Gable, Fatty Arbuckle) with abuse stories resurfaced. In 2018, *TIME* magazine made their Person of the Year "The Silence Breakers," a group of women who had spoken about sexual assault during the #MeToo movement. "There's a human behind this, someone who was very hurt and wronged. But that's ok: it fuels my fire," Actress and activist Rose McGowan said to *TIME*. "They really fucked with the wrong person. I am here to permit you to be angry. And especially women who were conditioned, since birth, to be polite. Politeness kills. Know your power. Know your worth. Why not fight back? What else are we doing?"

Taylor Swift graced the cover—so did other famous actresses, engineers, lobbyists, and farm workers. It was a watershed moment when the world realized this was real. That it could change things, and for some people, it was something to be afraid of. They called it a witch hunt, branded it cancel culture. Women speaking out always has consequences, as I mentioned. But this time, our anger worked. And Gen Z women took note.

Rage driving change isn't an American thing—it's worldwide. Argentina's Green Wave Movement demonstrated this.

In Argentina, women had been dying from illegal abortions for decades. An estimated 500,000 illegal abortions were per-

formed annually, and women were paying the cost.

Activists began organizing around abortion rights in 2015 and 2016. Argentinian abortion laws were among the strictest in Latin America—the procedure was only legal in cases of rape or danger to the woman's life. Hundreds of women were dying at the government's hands. The women gathered, holding scarves and dressing up as characters from *The Handmaid's Tale*, screaming, drumming, and running in hordes through the streets.

After a bill to legalize abortion reached Congress in 2018, millions of women flooded Buenos Aires and other Argentinian cities, camping outside Congress for days as the decision was being debated. They made their voices heard —literally: screams, drumming, singing—all within earshot of the decision-makers. Rage and joy filled the streets, green flashes everywhere, women free, uninhibited, and determined to make the world a safe place for themselves and their daughters. They shared testimonies of their mothers and grandmothers dying from illegal abortion, and held up photos of their friends who had also perished. Women of all ages demonstrated, not just the typical middle-aged protester. When the Chamber of Deputies passed the bill, there was more weeping, more shouts, more joy.

But just two months later, the Senate voted no: 38-31.

This would've been the end, but because of their belief—and their rage—it wasn't.

Throughout 2019 and 2020, green bandanas were inescapable: tied onto daughters' backpacks, seen on everyone's windows, and on everyone's minds. On International Women's Day, the streets were flooded again. Chile erupted in green, too, and so did Mexico, Colombia, and Ecuador.

With a new president in 2020 and a vow from him to make abortion legal, the bill reached the Senate again. As the votes

were counted, green fireworks erupted, green dust in the air. The bill passed 38-29, and the crowds of women roared once again, shouting "ES LEY! ES LEY! ES LEY!" (It's Law).

And so, after the drumming that shook the floor, the screaming that nearly broke their voices, the organized passion, the testimonies, the art, the scarves, and the color, they won. But not because they were silent. Because they screamed.

#MeToo wasn't the first instance of collective female anger creating change. When we think of the second wave of feminism, we think of unfulfilled housewives and their alleged burning bras. (No bras were actually burned, but the claim was an attempt to denigrate and humiliate women.) Anger was a central emotion for women's liberation supporters of the 1960s and '70s. They were angry at the women dying in dangerous backstreet abortions and abusive marriages, angry that they couldn't get their own credit cards or own property without a man. It was the simple act of society blocking the door: blocking opportunities for women to have full lives without danger, humanity, and fulfillment, that sparked riotous anger.

In our sophisticated age, shouldn't women be able to truly *live* instead of living in fear, anguish, and bureaucratic control? That was the question asked by young women who lived through this era. Individual frustration was channeled into collective action, and a remarkable set of changes ensued: Ms. Magazine launched in 1971—300,000 test copies sold in a reported 3 days. Roe v. Wade was decided in 1973, giving women the right to choose what happens to their own bodies. Title IX was passed the year before, prohibiting discrimination in education and in sports. The Equal Credit Opportunity Act was passed in 1974.

It's important to note that the fruits of the women's movement weren't accomplished only by fed-up housewives but also

by the hard work that this anguish caused. Rage is a motivator, not an instant fix. But without the rage, there is no motivation, there is no change.

The women before us had proven that rage worked. Rage worked even before intersectional feminism, before the Internet, before most women had working lives. So why wouldn't it work now? What if we could take that advantage and turn our similar anguish into new change?

Around 2017, most of us in Gen Z were 8 to 20 years old. We were still learning the world's power structures and dynamics, still understanding what works, how to change what isn't fair. #MeToo emerged at the perfect moment for us to metabolize it. The women around us, the role models, the women in power positions, were sharing their stories, and their anger was heard.

The movement taught us many things, but the most important lesson was that speaking up, while it has consequences, is worth it. Sharing our stories is hard. But there's a reason we do it. Of course, we were indoctrinated with politeness. Of course, we learned the rules of being a girl, just like the girls before us did. But we saw the cracks in the facade. And that's not nothing. In fact, it leads us directly to today. To the punk rock bands expressing themselves freely, the screams in arenas, and popular stories. I was too young to understand what sexual assault really meant when this happened. But I heard male voices complaining about the danger of false accusation, the falls that men take for women's voices.

And I knew their opinions were wrong. Because even though I hadn't fully experienced the world as a woman yet, I knew that women have taken the fall for men. Not just circumstantially but consistently, and for centuries.

This didn't make me wary or scared of using my voice. It

made me feel empowered and angry. And I know other women felt that way, too.

"Almost every woman I have ever met has a secret belief that she is just on the edge of madness," activist and author Elana Dykewomon wrote. "There is some deep, crazy part within her, that she must be on guard constantly against 'losing control' — of her temper, of her appetite, of her sexuality, of her feelings, of her ambition, of her secret fantasies, of her mind." This world makes *me* feel crazy. And sure, I am a "highly sensitive person," but my emotions have been dismissed countless times just because it's *me* who's feeling them. I have been made to feel hysterical, that I am overreacting, when what I am doing is simply human. We are shamed, made to feel less than, and judged. When will women have the freedom to be people? When do we finally get afforded the ability to be messed-up, complicated, mistaken human beings, instead of Instagram Cinderellas who do Pilates?

My background in classic film allows me to recognize that angry women in pop culture are not a new thing. As long as women have been oppressed, we've been angry—for thousands of years. It was just a different kind of anger. In *Splendor in the Grass* from 1961, Natalie Wood plays Deanie, a teenager in 1920s Kansas who is driven mad by the expectation of being a "nice girl" in her relationship with Bud, a teenage boy played by Warren Beatty. In the 1920s in America, and in this film, the pressure placed on girls to be "nice" was an expectation of staying a virgin–and an expectation that "good girls" don't have sexuality–and that women don't feel anything.

In one striking, unforgettable scene, Deanie is in the bath as her Mom questions her. "Did he spoil you?" she asks. "Spoil?

Did he spoil me?" She then drowns her head in the bath, coming up for air a moment later, and screaming at the top of her lungs: "No, Mom! I'm not spoiled! I'm just as fresh and virginal as the day I was born!" Her Mom mutters, "Deanie, stop it," but she continues screaming. "I'm a lovely virginal creature. I've been a good little, good little, good little girl!" She stands up and runs away. "I've done everything you and Daddy told me…I hate you, I hate you, I hate you!" All we are left with is the look of despair on her mother, Mrs. Loomis's, face as her daughter slowly descends into an echo chamber of her own creation.

The patriarchal double standard looms large in Deanie and Bud's relationship. Deanie is the one who is called crazy for her desires, and who must chase an idealized version of womanhood, one where she must change everything about herself to please a man. Meanwhile, he can go to college, date as many girls as he wants, and pursue a career of his choice. And Deanie is also the one who ends the movie wistfully, having not quite moved on, but simply realized that it wouldn't work. She is stuck in the past; he is allowed to move on with his life. She must forever cling to who she is supposed to be. She attempts suicide, trying to drown herself in a river, trying to find a semblance of freedom in the natural world. She goes to a mental institution and does occupational therapy. She tries everything to release the intensity.

The emotions Deanie is feeling are alive today. They are alive in mental breakdowns on the side of the road, they are alive in arenas full of screaming girls, green fireworks, angry tweets, and Broadway plays. These feelings never died. Their causes simply shifted (and, to be honest, not that much). I remember taking a "purity" test for "fun" in my sophomore year of high school. All the girls judged each other and felt bad for having a lower score, for being more "slutty." If we view it this way, the pressure

since Deanie's time has only gotten worse. This pain has always existed; only it is now even harder to avoid.

The difference now is that our rage is channeled into something larger: it is not seen as a personal failing as it was decades ago. It is seen as a crisis. And we don't have to deal with it alone. We are starting to understand this anger by harnessing it together. Deanie and the women of the past did not have the freedom of expression that we do. Expression and creation are the only way out; otherwise, we remain forever stuck in the contradiction of feminine existence. Femininity was once a cage, but in the 2020s, it has become a mode of expression… that includes rage. Femininity was once the all-powerful expectation of purity and hospitality: it is now "whatever the fuck we want it to be." It is now pink (and black), happiness (and rage), confidence (and insecurity).

This is the key difference between now and then. We have the power to make our screams into something bigger. We have choice, when historically we only had compliance.

So go ahead and let it out.

Afterword

I finished this book in the spring of 2026. I was navigating television pitches, a writing career, schoolwork, family, and psychiatric crises. I have never felt more vulnerable, and I think that state contributed to the book. In some sense, Gen Z girls are all in crisis right now, at varying levels of intensity. I struggled with how to finish this book, but I think the best way to end it is by sharing some events that have happened to me very recently in hopes of illustrating, once and for all, how the Modern Cage has its grip on every single woman.

As an intellectual woman, and particularly as a teen girl, I'm at the intersection that technically "shouldn't exist" in our society. When I'm being interviewed or having casual conversations, people will walk away or simply gawk at me for pointing out cultural truths or being "too smart" for the body I'm living in. This is something I face every day, trying to be heard and not infantilized, trying to make myself presentable instead of being gazed at as a manic depressive with severe fluctuations in self-esteem and no place in a functioning society. But don't worry, when I'm on television or talking to readers, I'm your perfect, polished teen girl, because I have to be.

This spring, I attended a film festival as a guest. Exhausted and happy at the closing party, I walked around the room pointing out movie stars with my best friend. A man, much taller and clearly drunk, approached us. We talked for a while, and then he touched

me. I allowed it because it's my job to be polite and nice to people at film festivals. It's my job to make men feel comfortable.

"You're too cute to be here," he said. "This place is weird. Wanna leave?" It was clear what his insinuation was, and my friend and I looked at each other in veiled disgust.

"No, I work here," I said.

I reported him to the team, but for a moment there, standing in a black dress and heels, I wondered if there was a good way to be a woman at all in this world anymore. By dressing up, I can potentially get taken seriously intellectually. That also means numerous men sexualize me. At this one festival, I was called a "sexy lady," a "doll," and a "pretty girl" in a single day. (When I get called a "doll," I always like to point out that I have control over my arms and legs. That abates it a bit, although Boomer men usually don't get the joke and end up showing me more pictures of their children's graduations anyway.)

I wanted to fade, I wanted to stop being who I am because it's so hard to exist, to try to charm professionals and convince them I'm worth the risk to be able to pursue my projects while simultaneously being objectified, humiliated, and laughed at. I am full of rage at a world that will not let me exist without wanting more from me. I am furious at men who think they can touch me, comment on me, or criticize my existence. I'm angry that the single mothers in my generation aren't getting any support; I'm angry that every one of us has to fend for ourselves. I'm sick of trying to fit into a box to share my voice so my words matter. I'm sick of feeling unsafe every day because no matter where I go, someone is judging my body, my words, my worth as a woman.

My struggles are different from anyone else's. Other women are subject to vastly different expectations and confines than I am. All I'm trying to do with this book is permit you to blame the

world, not yourself. I'm permitting you to be fed up. And I'm standing there with you, in the party, in the field, in the school auditorium—because no one wants to say it, but the world has made living so hard for women. And I can tell you that I've wanted to give up so many times because of how I'm treated, but I don't. I won't let the world have that hold on me. I won't let the "novelty," "circus act," and "smart girl, needs work" comments get to my message. In fact, perhaps those messages are telling me that I make society uncomfortable. In that case, I'm very proud. I'll be smart and work hard if the patriarchy hates it any day. Oh, spite.

Society doesn't like to change. Society likes to mutate itself. From diet culture to wellness culture, from stigma to romanticization, from impossible standards to yet another different impossible standard. None of these expectations are new. They simply copy, as if these impulses are in societal DNA, a mutation that keeps repeating.

Imagine society as a forest. With each expectation or societal "thought pattern" is a tree. There's a tree for beauty standards, trees for racist stereotypes, and trees for mental health stigma. If we want to change each of these, most of us are going to have to bushwhack through the forest to find a new tree, a new way of thinking about the topic. This is incredibly difficult and requires an unbelievable amount of work. And even if the diet culture tree is replaced with the wellness culture tree, it could end up reinforcing the same issue. Each tree must be examined both individually and collectively. Society doesn't move by itself. We need people to explore, analyze, and cut through the forest. Some trees work better for particular people. Some of us have rougher terrain, more trees to handle. It's a fight for all of us, but it's not an equal fight. And we're not sure if we can ever truly replace a societal pattern, but we try anyway. We try because our

lives as women are too important to disregard. Because women suffering need to fight for a better life. Not because it's easy, but because it simply has to be done.

Femininity now includes the forced, brittle expectations of perfection (porcelain) and the lashing out, sadness, anger, and creation that the modern cage brings. This is womanhood now: an endless array of contradictions that ends in true expression—that's the only way out. The "Bell Jar," the "Modern Cage," the "patriarchy," whatever you want to call it—it's alive and well. It's a macho president, a degrading podcaster, a 50,000-word Reddit page, and thousands of years of history, and it still exists. It didn't die with #MeToo, and it won't die with us. I am standing in the middle of this cage. I am screaming to you. I am writing about it, and it still has a hold on me.

After all this, after analyzing movements, people, and social dynamics for tens of thousands of words, you and I still have to wake up tomorrow and be girls, in this moment in history. How do we do it? How do we get up every day and keep living when Pac-Man is coming after us, when we are just playing whack-a-mole against society?

There's no clear answer, but for me, it's living anyway and holding each other, screaming, rising even when it feels impossible. Forgetting the savior (unless you're Christian), and realizing that the hands we hold, and the girls who hold us, might be the most important thing. Inside the modern cage, inside everything they want us to be, their expectations. If not for anyone else, for each other. You don't need permission to be dangerous, to be contradictory, to scream, to make decisions, and to have opinions. We're not getting out of this cage anytime soon, but we can make patriarchy look ridiculous. The seeming impossibility of escaping is what makes it even more important for us not to resign, to go ahead and leave the psych ward, and scream at the

top of our lungs. To feel at peak velocity. To make our power so undeniable that we topple the dominoes laid out. We can make the art we want and break all the rules they set out for us. Being a girl is impossible. We choose to do it anyway.

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